

Singing Families of Aberdeenshire: Context, Structure, and Meaning in the Scottish Ballad

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The North-East of Scotland is sometimes called “the cold shoulder of Scotland”, with the cold winds coming off the surrounding North Sea. Cold and windy it may be, but it is also home to one of the most remarkable singing traditions in the world: the classic ballad tradition. In Francis James Child’s *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* fully two-thirds of the primary texts come from Aberdeenshire.¹⁾

The ballad in Scottish tradition is a *song that tells a story*, a compact narrative communicating history, experience, and happenstance along with the human emotional responses to them. The songs contain some of the most distilled and powerful poetic language to be found anywhere, in the service of dramatic, and sometimes horrifying plots.

Before reflecting on the form and structure of the Scottish ballad, I want to focus on the *people who sing*. There has been extensive research on ballad texts, their background history, and the melodies to which they were sung, but comparatively little attention spent on *who sings, why they sing, what it means to them, and how the songs function* in their lives. The following may be considered a brief introduction to four prominent Scottish Traveller families, people for whom song is a part of daily life, a part of regular human communication, rather than for performance on a stage. On the way, we will encounter their society and consider their singing style.

Families are the basic unit of folk song. Songs are sung in the home in everyday life. They are not just for a formal evening, but rather sung casually by the fireside on an evening, or perhaps with a small gathering of friends. But for the most part, the songs are sung as people go about their daily lives: cleaning, working, taking care of children.

Songs have a deeply symbolic role in the lives of those raised with them. In singing songs, memories are evoked of where they were heard, who sang them and what it felt like at the time. Jane Turriff recalls, “My granfather, he used tae come in about an [he’d be] goin away tae his work an that: very, very happy singin, always singin” (Turriff 1996: 8). She talked, too, of her father, his way of being, singing as he readied himself for work. This is not about the song, as such, but about the person and about memory. And it is not a performance, but a man living with a song under his breath (see McKean 2014 for more on Jane’s father and the texture of song in singers’ lives).

Before we meet our families, a word about Scottish Travellers, a semi-nomadic people considered native to Scotland with a pair of intertwined origin legends: (1) they are Scotland’s oldest indigenous people, itinerant metalworkers (tinsmiths) and current families descend from those who no longer had employment after the breakdown of the clan system (Douglas 2006: 1, 5,

7–11), and (2) that they have possible cultural and genetic kinship to the Gypsies, or “Egyptians” as they were called due to their misunderstood origins, Romany Gypsies who arrived in Scotland in the early sixteenth century, during the reign of James IV (Nord 2006: 3). Even today, Travellers are victims of virulent prejudice in the media and the settled population’s attitudes have been characterized as “the last acceptable face of racism in modern Scotland” (Amnesty 2013).

Although they were itinerants, Travellers were also an important part of Scottish life for many years, working as seasonal farmhands and dealers in used and recycled materials. Since the 1950s, they have also been valorized for preserving traditional stories, songs, and customs (Henderson 1980: 85–87).

The Stewarts of Blair

Our first family is the “Stewarts of Blair”, a family of singers who came to a wide listening public when journalist Maurice Fleming recommended to folklorist Hamish Henderson that he record them in 1954 for the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh. In the seasonal berry-picking camps, Henderson recorded the Stewarts and found a lively tradition of song after the work was done. He said recording songs at the berryfields was like holding a “tin-can under Niagara Falls” (Henderson 1992: 102).

Belle Stewart was born in 1906 on the banks of Loch Tay, in a little bow tent. Belle was raised in this life of seasonal and itinerant work. When not working and taking care of her family, she sang and played with her husband Alec, who played the “goose”, a bagpipe without the over-the-shoulder drones. The family was already performing as a concert party, booking their own halls and travelling all over the north-east of Scotland, as far north as Banff (for more on Belle Stewart, see Douglas 1992).

Belle learned some of her songs from her brother Donald, as well as her parents and became a real matriarch, known in folk song circles after one of her best known songs, “The Queen Among the Heather”. Every year, Travellers from all over Scotland would gather in Blairgowrie to harvest the raspberries, strawberries and blackberries in the fertile fields which supplied fruit for the huge Dundee jam industry and further afield. Belle



Figure 1. Belle Stewart, surrounded by four generations (photo by Thomas A. McKean, 1991)

Stewart tells the story in her own composition, “The Berryfields of Blair”.

When berry time comes roond each year
Blair’s population’s swelling,
There’s every kind o picker there
And every kind o dwellin.
There’s tents and huts and caravans,
There’s bothies and there’s bivvies
And shelters made wi tattie-bags
And dug-outs made wi divvies.

Latterly, Belle and Alec rented berryfields and put the crop in themselves, becoming settled entrepreneurs. Belle was given the Order of the British Empire in the 1960s for her services to traditional music. Travellers had “arrived” and become respectable, though some in the village despised her for getting above her station.

Sheila Stewart (1935–2015)

Belle’s daughter, Sheila, lived – as far as singing goes – very much in her mother’s shadow.

To tell you the God’s honest truth, when me, my mother and Cathie was out singing, me and Cathie werenae our own persons in wir own right. We couldnae speak. We had to go forward, sing the song, and then step back. My mother was the head of the family, she was the mouth-piece, because she was the “Queen Amang the Heather” and it was expected of her and we knew our place. (Pegg, “Sheila Stewart”)

Sheila felt that she was not allowed to sing the “Queen Amang the Heather”, because of her mother.

It was classed as her song – she was the “Queen Amang the Heather” – and I was never allowed to sing it in public; until I knew my mother was failing a wee bit, and one day I sung it on stage and she whispered, “It’s my song”. I says, “So?” ... “Oh carry on then darlin’!” (Pegg, “Sheila Stewart”)

Sheila grew into her role as a doyenne of Scottish traditional ballad singing, taking complete mastery of “The Twa Brithers” (Child 49), her mother’s song.

Sheila picked some songs directly from her mother, but many from her uncle Donald, from whom Belle also learned:

My greatest memory was my Uncle Donald. He comes top of the list every time wi me

because he was the one that I practically lived wi – brought up wi – and because he taught me the ballads. To me, the first love in my life is ballads. (Pegg, “Sheila Stewart”)

Note that phrase, “the first love of my life is ballads”, a telling indication of the importance of traditional songs to Traveller families which we will see played out elsewhere, too.

Robertson-Higgins

Our next group is the Robertson-Higgins family from Aberdeen, cousins to the Blairgowrie Stewarts: Jeannie Robertson, Lizzie Higgins, Donald Higgins and Albert Stewart. The best-known of these by far is Jeannie Robertson (1908–1975), called by American collector Alan Lomax a monumental figure in the world of folk song.



Figure 2. Jeannie Robertson (photo from LP, *Jeannie Robertson: The Great Scots Traditional Ballad Singer*, TOPIC Records, TSDL052, 1963)

Jeannie Robertson was famous, in particular, for “My Son David” (Child 13), another ballad of murder and fratricide in which a younger son is jealous of the older’s inheritance (see Robertson 1952 for a rendition of the song). The rivalry over inheritance is not made explicit in the song, but rather explained in contextualizing narratives that Travellers tell *alongside* the songs. Before or after singing “Son David”, Jeannie’s nephew, Stanley Robertson, would invariably explain the younger brother’s motivation:

My mither used tae aye tell me the stories o the ballads. She said they were twins, the twa laddies were twins, ye ken? And there’s only like minutes between them. They were like kings, so one’s gan tae get the best o aathing. But I think the elder one canna get his younger brother to dee fit he’s tellt; he winna rule by him. Naebody could take him tae trial, cause he’s the big shot. [...] It’s a moral fight wi his ain conscience and he’s contemplatin suicide. (Robertson 2009)

So the song does not contain the whole story, a little background knowledge is required to unpack the full meaning of a ballad, a strong tradition in the Travellers’ world and one I will return to later.

Lizzie Higgins (1929–1993)

Monumental though Jeannie was, she is also, of course, part of a family and a network of singers

and tradition bearers. Jeannie's daughter, Lizzie Higgins, also became well known as a singer, but was more diffident about performing. (When she was first recorded, the fieldworker had to put the microphone in the bedroom, trail the cable down the hall, and record from another room entirely.)

Lizzie is said to have taken her style *and* repertoire from her father to a great extent and, indeed, she sounds quite different from her mother and possesses a distinctive sound. This is an example of being in the presence of an acknowledged authority – her mother – but learning from her father, not the obvious source. But it is worth remembering that most of that learning of repertoire and style came well before Jeannie was well-known and had acquired the authority of her *public* reputation (see Smith 1975 for more on Lizzie Higgins).

Stanley Robertson (1940–2009)

Jeannie's nephew was Stanley Robertson, a peerless storyteller and ballad singer of the Traveller tradition, and a fish filleter by trade. His versions of songs are usually very full and "complete" in the scholar's understanding of that term.²⁾ Robertson was remarkable in his ability to contextualize a song with a constellation of social, historical, literary, scholarly, and experiential contextual information. Equally at home at a fireside ceildh and in a university lecture hall, he could easily spend two hours unpacking the hidden depths and meanings of a single ballad.

The family tradition extends beyond singing, of course, and Jeannie's nephew, Albert Stewart, was a fiddler of remarkable heart coming from the extensive Traveller instrumental tradition of piping and fiddling. Generations of Travellers were pipers and fiddlers, often finding their outlet in the military context; generations of Travellers rose through the ranks of military piping to become highly decorated soldiers. Albert's grand-uncle was piper to Duke of Atholl. His niece, Carmen Higgins, carries on the tradition and is still active in the North-East of Scotland. Higgins used to visit Stewart in her school days, play fiddle with him, learn from him. "I was just totally amazed at him," she says, "by the kind o music he played. [...] I grew up with a kind of music and that'll *never* go away" (Higgins 1998).



Figure 3. Elizabeth Stewart and Stanley Robertson, 1988 (photo by Ian MacKenzie, used by permission Dept. of Celtic and Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh)

The Stewarts of Fetterangus

Perhaps the most remarkable family for sheer numbers of performers is the Stewart family of Fetterangus, near Mintlaw in North-East Scotland. Between 1930 and 1975, the family provided



Figure 4. Jane Turriff with her mother Christina, ca. 1972 (Jane Turriff collection)

musicians for more than 10 professional and semi-professional bands, mostly dance bands, playing foxtrots, quicksteps and, of course, Scottish traditional music for traditional set dances.

One of the greatest singers from the village was Jane Turriff (1915–2013), born Jane Stewart in Aberdeen. As well as being a wonderful ballad singer, Jane was also very keen on Country and Western music; she was a great fan of Jimmie Rodgers and other popular singers of her day like Gracie Fields. *Many* Scottish traditional singers, and most Travellers, have a great affinity for Country and Western music; Gaelic tradition, too, is full of enthusiasts. There seems to be something in common between the raw emotion carried in both types of song; they express emotion and heartbreak without any filter – direct unvarnished emotion.

Here is Jane's version of probably the most internationally popular of the Scottish ballads, "Barbara Allan" (Child 84), which gives us a chance to explore some characteristic features of the Anglo-Scottish ballad.

1. I fell in love with a nice young girl
Her name was Barbara Allan
I fell in love with a nice young girl
Her name was Barbara Allan.

2. Till I got sick and very ill
I sent for Barbara Allan
Till I got sick and very ill
I sent for Barbara Allan.

3. It's look ye up at my bedheid
And see fit ye find hangin
A silver watch and a guinea-gold chain
That hangs there for Barbara Allan.

4. It's look ye doon at my bedside
And see fit ye find sittin
A basin fu o my hert's tears
That sit there for Barbara Allan.

5. She pu'ed the curtains from the bed
And said young man you're dying
She pu'ed the curtains from the bed
And said young man you're dying.

6. One kiss from you would do me good
One kiss from you would cure me
One kiss from me you shall not get
Though your poor heart lies breaking.

7. She hadnae gane a mile or twa
When she heard the church bells ringin
And every word they seemed to say
Cruel-hertit Barbara Allan.

8. Oh mother dear it's make my bed
And make it long and narrow
For my poor lover died for me
And I'll die for him tomorrow.

9. Her mother she has made her bed
And made it long and narrow
And laid her down to fall asleep
And she's died for her true lover. (Turriff 1996, track 17)

This song has some telling features of the ballad genre: diction, formulae, and structure, features that tell us that this is a ballad:

- *Repetition* for example, in the first couplet

- *Formulaic phrases* “nice young girl”, “Oh mother dear”, “long and narrow”, “she hadnae gane a mile or twa”
- *Incremental repetition*
 - stanzas 3 and 4, where the syntax is the same, but the content changes slightly (...at my bedheid, ...at my bedside);
 - stanzas 8-9 which alter the request to the resulting action: “make my bed” of stanza 8 becomes “she has made her bed” in stanza 9;
 - in stanza 6 “One kiss from you...” is used three times. This increases the tension dramatically in the simplest of ways: one kiss will help me, one kiss will *cure* me. “One kiss from me you *shall not get*” even though your heart is breaking – a very simple device but extremely effective.
- *Commonplace verses and imagery* stanzas 8 and 9, in which a bed or grave is requested and given, ending in the heroine’s death. A classic, formulaic closing stanza found in some versions is,

Out one grave grew a red rose
And out of the other a briar
And they both twisted into a true-lover’s knot
And there remained forever.
- *Annular patterning* stanzas 1–2 and 8–9 form pairs which mirror each other, so called annular patterning. The first set describe the young man’s illness and situation, calling for Barbara Allan, embodying his suffering and need for her, the second set tells her side of the story, her reaction to his death and embody her sense of guilt.

The song tells quite mysterious story, actually: Barbara Allan goes to see her dying lover and when told that a single kiss would cure him, turns away, spurns him and hastens his death. Clearly a hard-hearted and cruel woman. But, this is an instance where a different version of the same song illuminates a mystery, explaining her behaviour and completely changing our perspective, as a stanza from Stanley Robertson shows:

Bit I remember lang ago,
A-drinkin in the tavern
When ye an aa yer couthy friends
When ye slighted Barbara Allan. (Robertson, “Barbara Allan”)

Sometime before, Sir John had refused to acknowledge her in public, perhaps being of a different social order. In Stanley’s version of the song, Sir John admits his wrongdoing and that Barbara Allan was in the right:

He turned his head roon tae the wa

For death tae him a-dealin
Adieu, adieu, my friends, adieu
But be kind tae Barbara Allan. (Robertson, “Barbara Allan”)

So, different versions of a ballad, even within close cousin-related families, can have very different atmospheres that can lead us, the listeners, to completely different conclusions.

Jane’s father, Donald, played fiddle and sang, while her mother, Christina, sang the old ballads and that is how Jane acquired them, just by overhearing her mother singing while going about the chores of daily life. One of Jane’s best-known songs, learned from her mother, is “The Dowie Dens of Yarrow” (Child 214), a ballad well known in the North-East, though it clearly has origins in the south of Scotland – the ballads move about freely within language territories, and even sometimes beyond them as international variants of the same stories show (for example in the Scandinavian countries).

He’s gaen tae his lady gan
As he had done before o
Sayin, “Madam I maun keep a tryst
On the dowie dens o Yarrow.

Oh bide at hame, ma lord, she said
Oh bide at hame, my marrow
For my three brothers, they will slay thee
In the dowie dens o Yarrow. (Turriff 1996, track 3)

Other members of the family sang too, of course and one of the best known of these is Jane’s uncle, Davie Stewart. He sang “The Dowie Dens o Yarrow” with his own distinctive accordion accompaniment, honed by playing for crowds of cinema goers in Glasgow in the mid-twentieth century. (Note that Scottish ballads are not always sung *unaccompanied*; piano and fiddle are often used, pedal organ, guitar and accordion sometimes, too, another example of adaptation and change to suit changing circumstances. There are references to a guitar and a spinet being used to accompany singing in Boswell’s *Journal* of 1773 (153, 305), albeit in the Hebrides.) The tune is completely different from Jane’s and their words diverge considerably, too. Here are Davie’s first stanzas.

There were a lady into the north
Wid scarcely find her marrow
She wis courted by nine noblemen
In the dowie dens o Yarrow.

Her father had a young ploughboy
Wi him she loved most dearly
She dressed him up like a noble lord
And sent him on tae Yarrow. (D. Stewart 1957)

In fact, it is quite common for relatives to sing very different versions, as we saw with Lizzie Higgins learning from her father, rather than from her more famous mother.

The Fetterangus Stewarts



Figure 5. Elizabeth, Lucy, Jean, Frances, Ned, and Michael Stewart, 1959
(photo by Kenneth S. Goldstein)

A key family sub-grouping is the “Fetterangus Stewarts” – siblings Lucy, Jean and Ned Stewart and Jean’s daughters Elizabeth and Jane. Between them, they played piano, accordion, fiddle, tin whistle, bagpipes, harmonica, and Jew’s harp, and sang hundreds of songs for collectors from the 1950s onwards. They are celebrated for a remarkable fund of traditional lore: stories, riddles, music, songs of many kinds and particularly classic ballads.

The key figure is Lucy Stewart (1901–1982), an outstanding, though lesser-known, figure in modern folk revival (she is, curiously, only given a passing mention in Munro 1984 p. 117). A Traveller born in Skene Street, Aberdeen, Lucy made her living as a dealer of new and used goods, but she was also a wonderful performer of ballads, songs, folktales, legends and riddles. Of the ballad, she is an acknowledged master, one of Scotland’s greatest artists, and yet, since the LP of Child ballads produced by Kenneth S. Goldstein in 1964 (L. Stewart 1989), and the odd track on Alan Lomax’s compilation albums of British traditional songs (Lomax 2000), she has hardly appeared on record.

Unlike Jeannie Robertson, Lizzie Higgins, the Stewarts of Blair, Flora Macneill and other traditional singers who became part of the fabric of the professional and semi-professional folk revival, she never passed on her material to a paying public. Indeed, Lucy never performed in public at all, preferring to keep her domestic traditions where they belonged: “*No, niver, no,” according to her niece Elizabeth, “she wis too shy. [She sang] in e hoose an fan she wis oot in the cairtie wi me an Jane.”³⁾

Lucy’s repertoire, like that of most traditional singers in Scotland, was quite broad and includes centuries-old traditional ballads and children’s songs handed down through the generations, to Country and Western and Music Hall material. Older material was learned principally from her mother, Elizabeth Townsley, nicknamed Aul Betty. In the latter half of her life, Lucy had, and continues to have, more than twenty years after her passing, an influence on the Scottish folk scene through performances by her niece Elizabeth, through the use of recordings by the staff and students of the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (now the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland) degree program in traditional music, and through enthusiasts like broadcaster Arthur Argo, and revival singers such as Ray Fisher and Alison McMorland, all of whom spent time learning songs and singing style from this shy, unmarried woman with a wicked sense of humour and great sense of the ridiculous, only to be seen if one had acquired her complete trust. Among the most frequently heard of her songs at just about any Scottish festival are “The Plooman Laddies” and “I Am a Millert Tae Ma Trade,” often sung with little or no awareness on the part of the singer or the audience as to the recent source of the song.⁴⁾

Lucy might be thought of as a “pure”, unadulterated, non-commercial style and

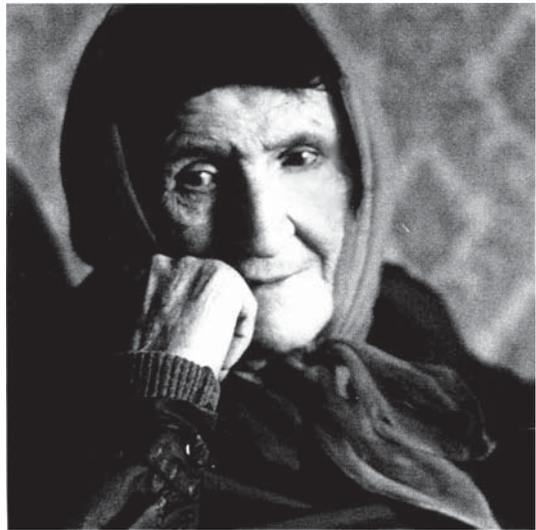


Figure 6. Lucy Stewart, 1959 (photo by Kenneth S. Goldstein)



Figure 7. Elizabeth Stewart at Sun Studios, Memphis, Tennessee, 1997 (photo by Thomas A. McKean)

repertoire of North East Scottish traditional singing. She remained a traditional, oral singer even though living in a society driven by literacy. For her, these were simply other influences, not qualitatively different ones. They did not transform the nature of her tradition. Lucy's niece, Elizabeth (b. 1939), on the other hand, is a mixture of her aunt's private persona and the more public one of her late mother, Jean (1911–1962), a musician and bandleader well known throughout the North-East. All three of these women have strong public and private strands to their lives, but as far as the traditional arts are concerned, Lucy's was a very private, domestic tradition, whereas Jean and Elizabeth took their traditions out of the domestic setting, considerably adapting them in the process, which is, after all, part of what perpetuates a *living* tradition.

Here are two versions of "The Jolly Beggar" (Child 279 Appendix), sung by Lucy and Elizabeth Stewart. Their singing styles are *very* different, a measure of the role of individual creativity within tradition. Elizabeth is very aware of the stylistic differences, describing Lucy's as "plain" and her timing as leisurely and stately (questions of style being virtually impossible to deal with on the printed page, I leave readers themselves to listen to the two singers on the two recordings cited).

Lucy Stewart (1959)

There was a jolly beggar,
And a-beggin he wis boun,
An he's taen up his quarters,
In some landward town.

An we'll gang nae mair a-rovin
Sae late intae the nicht
We'll gang nae mair a-rovin,
Lat the mune shine e'er sae bricht.

He widnae lie in barns,
Or he widnae lie in byres,
In ahint the ha door,
Or before the fire.

The beggar's bed wis made at een,
Wi guid clean strae an hey,
An just ahint the ha door,
An there the beggar lay. (Lucy Stewart 1989)

Elizabeth Stewart (1994)

There was eence a jolly beggar,
And a-beggin he wis boun,
An he's taen up his quarters,
In some langward toon.

An we'll gang nae mair a-rovin
Sae late untae the nicht
An we'll gang nae mair a-rovin,
Let the meen shine e'er sae bricht.

He widna lie in barns,
Nor he widna lie in byres,
Bit in ahint the ha door,
Or jist afore the fire.

Oh the beggar's bed wis made at een,
Wi gweed clean strae an hey,
An just ahin the ha door,
There the beggar lay. (E. Stewart 2004)

Another song in the Stewarts' tradition is "The Two Sisters" (Child 10). Most versions begin, "There were two sisters lived in a bower", "There were two sisters lived in a ha", or "There were three ladies playin at the ba". Not one of the 146 versions I have looked at have the Stewarts' opening line "O there were twa sisters lived in this place", or Lucy's refrain for that matter. At stanza three, their version begins to match with many collected in North America, and in Britain by Gavin Greig and James B. Duncan, among others (Greig and Duncan 1981–2002).

"The Swan Swims Sae Bonnie o"

Lucy Stewart

Elizabeth Stewart

Oh there were twa sisters lived in this place

There were twa sisters lived in this place

Hey o ma nannie o,

Hey o, binnorie, o.

Een was fair an the ither was deen,

Een o them wis fair an the ither wis deen

An the swan swims sae bonnie o. (L. Stewart 1989) An the swan swims sae bonnie o. (E. Stewart 2004)

Again the correspondences are close, though there are the expected natural variations, and the first refrain line is, surprisingly in a conservative tradition, completely different.

The two versions are not quite as close as Elizabeth *feels* they are, but this highlights the fact that the essential factors of traditionality are cultural fidelity, and the tribute paid in the remembering and singing of the song, rather than slavish word-for-word reproduction.

In the 1960s and 70s, Elizabeth played Scottish dance music for Foxtrots, Quick-steps, Tangos, Two-steps, Waltzes and the more indigenous Eightsome Reel and Gay Gordons. She also adapted some of Lucy's ballads, "up-tempo" for the dance floor, feeling compelled to find a way to transpose this material so important to her organically from one environment into another (for an examination of these adaptations, see McKean 1999).

A Note on Literacy and Orality

It is often thought that literacy and orality are mutually exclusive, that oral singers cannot or should not write, that those who know how to write cannot possibly have oral traditions, that one somehow harms or adulterates the other. The Stewarts of Fetterangus were and are literate: Lucy could certainly read, though her writing was not as fluent. Elizabeth and her late mother were both highly literate textually and musically, and could write in Scots as well. This latter skill is almost entirely self-taught, sometimes by the example of books of Burns' poetry, local newspaper columns, or song books.

Elizabeth uses writing as an *aide memoire*. The process of writing revitalises the words in her mind, and restores the flow of her memory, reminiscent, perhaps, of listening to Lucy singing. The most important of Elizabeth's notebooks is one made in the late 70s when Lucy was in her declining years. The volume holds particular significance for her: "*It's had Lucy's hands on it."

Writing songs down also gives them a context for “performance” when the domestic setting in which they were passed on to her no longer exists. In the silent act, hearing the song in her head as she writes, she is a conduit for a dialogue between the written song and the internal, oral version. Writing is a performance – like singing – in itself.

On balance, we can say that literacy has much to do with the quality and fullness of a text, but very little to do with the quality of a *song*. As American collector Alan Lomax wrote in 1951,

The Scots have the liveliest folk tradition of the British Isles, and paradoxically, it is also the most bookish. [...] Everywhere in Scotland I collected songs of written or literary origin from country singers; at the same time, I constantly encountered learned Scotsmen who knew traditional versions of the great folk-songs. (Lomax 1998 booklet: 6)

The Stewarts of Fetterangus show us that tradition is syncretic and that writing down traditional songs has more to do with the symbolic power of song than the power of the writing. (For a much fuller treatment of this relationship, see McKean 2004.)

“The Gypsy Laddies” (Child 200)

I will finish this encounter with Scottish singers with a discussion of “The Gypsy Laddies”, a song in many way emblematic of Traveller identity that is found all over the English-speaking world and known by many names: “Johnny Faa”, “The Seven Yellow Gypsies”, “The Wraggle Taggle Gypsies”, “Black Jack Davey” (for an exploration of cultural contexts of the song, see Rieuwerts 2006).

The ballad tells the story of the abduction of a noble lady by itinerant strangers – perhaps gypsies – in the southwest of Scotland. The Gypsies enjoyed a brief period of favor in sixteenth-century Scotland, being given responsibility for their own justice and keeping the peace. This was short lived, however, and in 1541, they were ordered, upon pain of death, to leave England entirely and Scotland in 1609 (Child). But enough of historical background. The true value of Scottish ballads is in the human story they tell.

1 Three gypsies cam tae oor hall door
And oh, but they sang bonny, o
They sang so sweet and too complete
That they stole the heart of our lady, o.

2 For she cam tripping down the stairs,
Her maidens too before her, o
And when they saw her weel faured face
They throwed their spell oot owre her, o.

- 3 When her good lord came home that night
He was askin for his lady, o
But the answer the servants gave tae him,
She's awa wi the gypsy laddies, o.
- 4 Gae saddle tae me my bonnie, bonnie black,
My broon it's ne'er sae speedy, o.
That I may go ridin this long summer day
In search of my true lady, o.
- 5 But it's he rode east and he rode west
And he rode through Strathbogie, o
And there he met a gey auld man
That was comin through Strathbogie, o.
- 6 For it's Did ye come east or did ye come west
Or did you come through Strathbogie, o
And did ye see a gey lady?
She was followin three gypsy laddies, o
- 7 For it's I've come east and I've come west
And I've come through Strathbogie, o
And the bonniest lady that ere I saw
She was followin three gypsy laddies, o.
- 8 For the very last night that I crossed this river
I had dukes and lords to attend me, o
But this night I must put in ma warm feet an wide,
An the gypsies widin before me, o.
- 9 Last night I lay in a good feather bed,
My own wedded lord beside me, o
But this night I must lie in a cauld corn barn,
An the gypsies lyin aroon me, o.
- 10 For it's Will you give up your houses and your lands,
An will you give up your baby, o?
An it's will you give up your own wedded lord

An keep followin the gypsy laddies, o?

11 For it's I'll give up my houses and my lands

An I'll give up my baby, o

An it's I will give up my own wedded lord

And keep followin the gypsy laddies, o.

12 For there were seven brithers o us aa

We all are wondrous bonnie, o

But this very night we all shall be hanged

For the stealin of the earl's lady, o. (J. Robertson 1953)

A classic ballad with many of the characteristics found in "Barbara Allan":

- *Repetition* (e.g., stanza 1: the first couplet repeats)
- *Formulaic or commonplace phrases* "saddle tae me", "my bonnie, bonnie black", "Did ye come east or did ye come west", "three gypsies".
- *Incremental repetition* (and incidentally question and answer, another common feature of the ballad tradition)
 - stanzas 6 and 7 where the question and answer mirror each other exactly: Did ye come east or did ye come west. Stanzas 10 and 11 do the same;
 - stanzas 8 and 9 have a version of incremental repetition ("the very last night" of line 1 answered by "but *this* night" in line 3).
- *Annular patterning* Many stanzas (particularly the question and answer stanzas come in pairs, and there is a clear overall annular pattern with the first stanza ("Three gypsies cam tae oor ha door") matching the closing, "There were seven brothers o us aa".

Structure aside, let us look at what the song means and how it does it. When we listen closely to the gypsy laddies and think about the story, the characters, what is really happening, it is a stark tale and an ambiguous one. A seemingly happily-married woman runs away with a gypsy band. The gypsies won her heart with their singing and taboo appeal, perhaps. Or did they steal her? When they saw her face, they "threwed their spell oot owre her". Did they bewitch her? Gypsies were feared for their magical powers, but is it charisma or something darker? It is one of those *ballad ambiguities* that allow us to write our own fears, ideas and hopes into a ballad text. A ballad's meaning is *indeterminate* and every individual listener shapes meaning out of what they hear and their own aspirations. This is why they stand the test of time and place; they speak of universal concerns and evoke emotions and thoughts without ever telling us *what to think*, how to judge.

So the lady has run away, or has been stolen. What of the lord? He is clearly distraught: That I

may go ridin this long summer day, in search o my true lady. He is willing and able to chase after her, but why exactly? He arrives at the riverside – in a cinematic jump cut typical of Scottish ballads in which we find ourselves in a completely different setting with no warning. One stanza we are in Strathbogie with the lord and the old man he encounters, the next we are on the riverside and the woman is responding to her husband.

There follows her descriptive assessment of her situation, in which she manages, in beautifully compact phrases, to encapsulate not just the physical circumstances in which she finds herself, indeed in which she has *chosen* to be, but the dramatic change to her circumstances (from living in a castle, to camping by a river in one night). “The very last night” I was a noble attended by servants, “But *this* night” I waded behind the gypsies. This structure is echoed in stanza 9, too: Last night she was in a warm bed with her noble lord by her side, *this* night she lies on a cold barn floor.

And now we come to some of the most revealing stanzas. Will you give up your houses and lands? Yes, I’ll give up my houses and lands. OK, so she does not value the trappings of wealth. Perhaps these are not enough to make her marriage worthwhile or rewarding. Perhaps there is a hint there that she is not a happy or contented wife. But what follows is truly stark, defiant, and shocking: “An I’ll give up my baby”, she says, surely the most extreme statement possible that there is something wrong in the marriage. Perhaps the lord is neglectful, or worse, perhaps he is abusive. We just do not know, but we do know that however reduced her social circumstances with the gypsies, it is far, far preferable to her married, upper-class life. “I will give up my own wedded lord” means I will give up *everything*, in this context. This is not a world of casual divorce and second marriages. And even though she *knows* the lord has won, and will wreak his revenge, she *still* defies him.

The song opens with hope, excitement and adventure: the gypsies sang beautifully, so sweetly that they stole the heart of the lady, perhaps they enchanted her. How is it that a few minutes later, as listeners to the final stanza, we have suddenly changed perspective (a shift typical of ballad poetics) and are inside the gypsies heads: “There were seven brothers o us aa and we are *wondrous bonnie*”, so far so good, but then a sudden, startling dramatic contrast: “But this very night we all shall be hanged for the *stealin* o the earl’s lady”. There in just a few simple words – without any moralizing or explicit indication of how *we* should feel – the songmaker has told us all we need to know. In stanza 1 we have the Gypsies singing so sweetly that they steal the *heart* of the lady; by stanza 12, authority in the form of the earl has reasserted itself and they are to be hanged for stealing the *lady*. Not her heart, but the *lady*. History is indeed written by the victor.

For Travellers, this song encapsulates so much of their plight, even today. Settled society is intrigued by their culture, their mystery, their semi-nomadic freedom, their ballads, songs, stories, and charisma. “They sang sae sweet an *too* complete.” But we are also frightened by those same attractions, by the unknown, the magical, and this fear of the Other – the outsider – continues to drive prejudice and injustice against Travellers and gypsies in the UK and around the world. Here, in this single song, Travellers’ fraught relationship of intrigue and dependence, rejection and

independence, is played out for all to see in beautiful, economic language. And *that* is what a centuries old ballad can do in our contemporary world.

We have the Travellers to thank for maintaining these traditions for us. Of course, there are countless ballad texts in books and manuscripts, and as many recorded versions to be found in archives and private collections around the English-speaking world, but in sharing their legacy of songs, the contexts in which they were sung, and the narratives that accompanied them (see McKean 2015), these Scottish Traveller families give us an extraordinary insight into the rich social, emotional, and didactic fabric of Scottish song and into the immense value of tradition itself.

Notes

- 1) Throughout this article, I use the term roughly as defined by Francis James Child, but without adhering exclusively to his closed list of 305 types (see Child).
- 2) For discussion of completeness and fragmentation, and how traditional singers' sense of these terms generally do not accord with those of scholars, see Constantine and Porter 2003.
- 3) Interview, 2000. Quotes preceded by an asterisk are taken down as close to verbatim as possible.
- 4) Lucy's singing of the "Millert" is not available commercially, but a version learned from her is on *The Fisher Family* (Fisher 1966); it has also been recorded by Hamish Imlach and numerous other revival singers.

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