



*Jeannie Robertson*

great traditional singers series



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Jeannie Robertson comes of roving stock - on both her father's and mother's side, her ancestors belonged to the travelling clans (Stewarts and Robertsons) who roamed the North-East of Scotland. Jeannie herself, although born in the city, spent much of her youth travelling "up the Dee and down the Don" with her people, and learned many of her songs at their campfires.

Music is in the blood of the travelling folk of Scotland, and it is rare that one finds a Stewart, a McPhee or a Robertson who is not a singer, a piper or a fiddler. Jeannie's mother was a great singer, and about half her vast repertoire of folksongs comes from her mother. Jeannie's husband, at one time a famous fiddler, frequently won prizes at the Highland Games. And her daughter is also a fine singer. No wonder, then that her home in Aberdeen is a real "ceilidh house" - the natural meeting place for all her friends who like listening to the old Scots traditional music. Three brothers are singers, her brother-in-law plays the pipes, and almost next door lives Albert Stewart, one of the finest fiddlers in Scotland. And when she lifts up her own voice, Jeannie can keep a *ceilidh* going for a whole night long.

Like most first-rate folk artists, Jeannie is not only a sensitive and even sophisticated interpreter of the communal balladry she shares with the travelling folk - she is also a gifted creator, shaping new songs of beauty and distinction which are none the less individual for being "in the idiom of the people". One of these - now quite popular in various parts of Scotland - she made while peeling tatties one morning in her home in Aberdeen. She is also a notable story-teller, with a number of international tales in her repertoire, and her own fire-side conversation, full of witty and pithy Scots expressions, is a joy to listen to. For the services of her talents to the world of folk song she was awarded the MBE in the 1968 Birthday honours.

Recorded by Bill Leader

Notes by Hamish Henderson of the School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh  
Cover photograph by Brian Shuel

Many folklorists, from Alan Lomax to Peter Kennedy, have encountered Jeannie and searched for expressions to describe her stature as a folk-artist (she has been called "monumental", "sweet and heroic" and "a glorious singer"). Maybe Herschel Gower, the young ballad scholar from Tennessee, hit it off best when he said: "If only Francis James Child could have heard this!"

#### **The Bonny Wee Lassie Who Never Said No**

In this song, the country lad out for a good time pulls a fast one on the "wee lassie", who, in songs of this type, usually comes out much better than he does.

#### **What a Voice**

The lament of the forsaken sweetheart whose baby is not yet born is found in various songs throughout the British Isles and America. The Scottish collector Gavin Greig called this song *I Wish, I Wish*, from the opening line of one of the verses which usually appears in it. The version current in Scotland seems to be descended from *The Marchioness of Douglas' Lament*, otherwise known as *O, Waly, Waly*. Many of the lines are also commonly found in the Appalachian pregnancy ballad *Careless Love*.

#### **My Laidie's Awa'**

Probably as a counter-balance to the evil black grimness of Scots Calvinism, the number of songs and fragments celebrating seduction among the heather are legion. This one is part of a longer song commonly called *The Butcher of Crieff* the title, however is much older, for it is found as a refrain to mediaeval balladry.

### The Gypsy Laddies

This classic ballad - No. 200 in the great Child collection - is widely known throughout the British Isles and America. In Scotland, the ballad is often associated with the Ayrshire house of Cassillis, and is declared to be a "true" ballad, although history does not bear this out. However, the ballad tale, in which handsome gypsies beguile a noble lady by the sweetness of their singing, has naturally made it very popular with the Scots travelling folk.

### When I Was No but Sweet Sixteen

This song of the forsaken maiden is less tragic than most of the same type. The reproach levelled at the wanton and deceiving ploughboy lads is not without affection. The song is best known on Speyside, and, indeed, is often called *Peggy on the Banks o' the Spey*.

### MacCrimmon's Lament

This is a folksong variant of a 19th century translation from the Gaelic. The MacCrimmons were hereditary pipers of the MacLeods of Skye, and the most famous piping family in the world. Pipers came from all over Scotland and Ireland to learn the art from them. The MacCrimmon of the lament was killed in a skirmish during the 1745 rebellion, and foreseeing his own death composed this song before leaving for battle.

### Roy's Wife of Aldivalloch

This song originated in the Cabrach part of the Aberdeen Highlands. Early in the 18th century, Roy of Aldivalloch married a teenage girl who tried (unsuccessfully) to run away from her unsatisfactory husband with a young farmer called Johnnie Gordon. Roy pursued the runaway couple, caught up with them, and reclaimed his Tibby. A ribald song about the episode became popular all over Scotland in a version "edited" by Mrs. Grant of Carron. The version Jeannie sings here is Mrs. Grant's, very slightly altered.

### Lord Lovat

Better known as *Lord Lovel*, this classic ballad - number 75 in Child's collection - is still very popular in Aberdeenshire. Professor Child included ten versions of this ballad in his great textual compilation *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, and most texts collected in modern times, as well as the one sung here, appear to have derived from Child's "H" text, a London broadside published in 1846. The English *Lord Lovel* has in Scotland become *Lord Lovat* - not unnaturally, for the latter is a famous name in the Highlands. The Lord Lovat of the 1745 rebellion, redoubtable chief of the clan Fraser, was beheaded on Tower Hill in 1747. Hogarth painted a celebrated portrait of him while he was in captivity awaiting trial. The ballad has been a popular one in both America and Britain. Most versions have a bouncing melody completely out of context with the tragic seriousness of the ballad tales; Jeannie's version, however, is cloaked in the proper solemnity.



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