

# The Singing Campbells

*Betty Campbell/Dave Campbell/Ian Campbell/  
Lorna Campbell/Winnie Campbell/Bob Cooney*

- 1 **Faur does Bonnie Lorna Lie** *Betty Campbell*
- 2 **Sleep Till yer Mammy** *Betty Campbell*
- 3 **Nicky Tams** *Dave Campbell*
- 4 **The Road and the Miles to Dundee** *Betty Campbell*
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- 6 **I Ken Faur I'm Gaun** *Bob Cooney*
- 7 **My Wee Man's a Miner** *Lorna Campbell*
- 8 **Fa, Fa, Fa Wid be a Bobby** *Bob Cooney*
- 9 **Foul Friday** *Bob Cooney*
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# SINGING CAMPBELLS

Traditions of an Aberdeen family

IAN CAMPBELL, LORNA CAMPBELL  
WINNIE CAMPBELL, DAVE CAMPBELL  
BETTY CAMPBELL, BOB COONEY



*The City of Aberdeen in mid nineteenth century  
Radio Times and Hulton Picture Library*

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The folk-song revival, “kiss of life” to tradition in so many areas of Britain, is in a sense an unnecessary development in North-East Scotland. This comparatively small area of headland has consistently produced a large number of folk-songs and folk-singers over a long period of years; it has been described by scholars as a treasure-house of tradition; it has provided collectors with the bases of some of the important British and American compilations; and today it ranks high among the tradition-bearing areas of the English-speaking world. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the foundations for this album were laid, firm as granite, in the area’s main city, Aberdeen.

Why does North-east Scotland have this unusually rich tradition? Geographic and economic circumstances have something to do with it. It has been a reasonably prosperous area through the centuries, with a deep-rooted stability scarcely influenced by the industrial revolution. This has, in turn, influenced the people, giving them a strong individual character, at the same time instilling in them an awareness and appreciation of the cultural heritage they cherish.

Another factor has been the regular inflow of representatives from other cultures. The itinerant Irish farm workers left their mark; the Highlanders introduced Gaelic melodic influences; visiting fishermen to the ports dotted along the coastline made notable contributions too. There was, of course, a vital local tradition. The farm servants, living in and working from their bothies, were a closely-knit community and it was natural that they should have their own bothy ballads such as Drumdelgie to bring entertainment and cheer to a life that was otherwise isolated and austere.

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Education and its attendant high standard of literacy brought a fair give-and-take between the literary and folk processes of transmission, giving the area a double advantage as far as song survival was concerned, and nearer the present day, broadsheets, song publications in newspapers, and early commercial recordings all acted as stimuli to the folk memory. This is borne out by the senior Campbells and Bob Cooney who recall the recordings of Willie Kemp in his heyday and the street singers who hawked chapbooks at markets and fairs.

Fortunately for posterity and for folk-song in the area, collectors were always on hand at vital stages in the musical development of the North-east and so, even today, we have a comparatively clear sequence-picture of the situation as it altered through the centuries. Professor Robert Scott of Aberdeen in 1783; Peter Buchan in the early 19th century; Gavin Greig, the Whitehill schoolmaster, and his collaborator, the Rev. James Duncan, Lynturk, followed up with their monumental work at the turn of the century, and since then, using the modern techniques at his disposal, Hamish Henderson of the School of Scottish Studies at Edinburgh University, has greatly added to their discoveries. Aberdeen’s proud boast today is that within the city lives the woman who is widely considered the finest ballad-singer in the English-speaking-world - Jeannie Robertson. The honour of the area has also been upheld at various times by Jimmy MacBeath, the gnome-faced wanderer now resident in Aberdeen; John Macdonald, the singing mole-catcher from Pitgaveny, Elgin; the late Jesse Murray, a real “lintie” from Buckie; chuckling-voiced John Strachan from Fyvie. We would also mention the roaring style of Davie Stewart; the ballad artistry of Lucy Stewart; the rich and promising talent of Norman Kennedy.

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Even in exile, Aberdeen singers continue the tradition. The singing Campbell family, now resident in Birmingham, supply proof of this. On this record, they range through the spectrum of folk-song as it is still to be found in the North-east. They give us street songs, love songs, bothy songs, and, of course, the great ballads of tradition.

Representing the first generation are Betty and Dave, Aberdonians born and bred, who provide some of the songs they learned during their youth in Aberdeen. Dave, whose father came of Caithness crofting stock, was a farm servant for a short spell about 30 years ago and it was then that he developed the fine “cornkister” style he uses for Nicky Tams.

Betty supplies a balance with a love song learned in her single days, and lullabies “tae lull the littluns” - Ian, Lorna and Winnie.

Surrounded by song, the young trio learned fast. School days for Ian did not only bring him the Dux Medal at Powis School. It also provided vernacular ditties such as those he sings here. As a lad Ian didn’t sing outside of the family sing-song. But later, when the skiffle craze was at its height, he formed a skiffle group, from which time dates his great interest in ensemble performance of traditional music.

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Lorna, who made her public debut by winning a cinema talent contest at the age of 10 - she sang Bonny Mary o’ Argyle - and Ian, both gave the high standard of performance expected of them by thousands throughout the country familiar with their singing. But, it will come as a surprise to many to hear their lesser-known sister, Winnie, giving gripping performances of Bogie’s Bonnie Bell and the exciting ballad, Lady Eliza.

Aberdonian Bob Cooney went to visit the Campbells for a weekend over ten years ago. In the course of this rather long weekend, he has become a member of the family by adoption and therefore his place on this record is assured by squatter’s right if not by birthright.

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**FAUR DOES BONNIE LORNA LIE** Betty Campbell learned this lullaby from a friend, Annie Irvine, who often came to baby-sit for her. It shows the typical down-to-earth quality of the folk lullaby as distinct from the book product.

**SLEEP TILL YER MAMMY** Best known in the Tyneside version, Dance Ti Th' Daddy, this is an example of one of the many songs known up and down the East coast. Like the previous song, Betty learned this from Annie Irvine.

**NICKY TAMS** The title of this song refers to the leather straps or twine the North-east farm workers tie below their knees to keep their trouser ends out of the muck. The farm workers spent virtually all their non-working hours in the bothy and this close social contact is probably responsible for the wealth of songs from this background. The tune for the song is usually associated in Aberdeenshire with The Banks o' Sweet Dundee, and the words are attributed to the late George Morris, Oldmeldrum, who was often called "the king of the cornkisters."

**THE ROAD AND THE MILES TO DUNDEE** One of the most common carriers of folksong has been the semi-professional singer who would do the rounds of socials and weddings. Such a person was Jess Paterson from whom Betty Campbell learned this song about 40 years ago in Aberdeen. It is still one of the most popular romantic songs in the area, known by young and old alike.

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**DRUMDELGIE** Like this one, most bothy ballads either give a straight-forward account of a day's work at the particular farm or the story of the term's hiring. The farm servant was fee'd by the half year at the hiring fair where he would be promised easy work and good conditions. If he got a bad bargain, he could do nothing but wait for the end of his term and sing out his discontent. However, the North-easter, always a fair man, would just as readily praise a good farm and a fair farmer as he would condemn a bad one and there are numerous bothy ballads to show this. The tune, sometimes called The Irish Jaunting Car, is probably the best known one in Aberdeenshire. It is also common in England, Wales and its native Ireland.

**I KEN FAUR I'M GAUN; MY WEE MAN'S A MINER; FA, FA, FA WID BE A BOBBY** Children have little time for sentiment and often parody the adult songs with an uncanny talent for deflation. Street songs like these have a powerful influence to exert on the folk-song revival in showing up the false emotionalism of many of the present-day products.

**FOUL FRIDAY** The hero of this song is remembered by Bob Cooney "He was a patriarchal old character when I was a kid 50 years ago. He looked an old man to me then." According to Bob, he made his living by selling ice-cream in the summer and roast chestnuts in the winter. The song makes reference to several city landmarks, The Green, Schoolhill, and the Auld Toon. Ian suggests that "Friday" may be a corruption of some Italian name such as Farridi. Foul (pronounced fool) is a local expression meaning dirty.

**ME AN' MI MITHER** Certain street songs are known only in Scotland because they depend on the dialect for their rhyming. This is one of this genre. By singing this song and the next in chorus, Ian and Lorna get the effect of a group of children chanting in the street.

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**WE THREE KINGS** A Birmingham children's song, this is one of a common type which parodies hymns and carols.

**BOGIE'S BONNIE BELLE** In the North-east, the farmer was often not known by his own name but, as in the present song, by that of his farm. This ironic tale of seduction stresses the social gulf between the farmer and his employees. The song ends with the farm labourer gloating over the lowly fate of his former love who marries one of the despised tinker clan. This illustrates a prejudice that does the North-easter no credit. His intolerance of the travelling people is a trait which unfortunately still lingers on. The song's current wave of popularity owes much to the performances of Alex and Bell Stewart of Alyth. It experienced an earlier vogue in the North-east through the singing of the late Geordie Stewart of Huntly, the man who gave Jimmy MacBeath his famous version of *Come All Ye Tramps and Hawkers*.

**THE CRUEL MITHER** Gavin Greig collected five versions of this ballad in Aberdeenshire, all to plainer tunes than that sung here. Ian's tune, in fact, comes from Ewan MacColl's aunt, Margaret Logan, a native of Perthshire. The texts of some of the first collected Scottish sets, notably in Herd's *Ancient and Modern Scottish Songs* and Johnson's *The Scots Musical Museum*, suggest pre-Christian origins for the ballad. This interesting version, too, gives us much of the powerful pagan mysticism.

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**LANG A 'GROWIN'** This ballad, although widespread, was not included in Professor Child's famous anthology. It has been suggested that it is based on the marriage of the young Urquhart of Craigston to Elizabeth Innes about 1633, although many other such arranged marriages at this time or before may have been the origin.

**LADY ELIZA** Many famous ballads survived most successfully in the North-east and this, called *Lady Diamond* in Child's compilation, is a fine example. The early music collector, Dean Christie, published a tune to the ballad in his *Traditional Ballad Airs* (Vol.II-1881) and Gavin Greig collected two, one of which is sung here by Winnie Campbell. The story, which comes from the *Decameron*, was translated into English in 1556 and probably found its way into popular circulation via a chapbook copy.

**WILL YE GANG, LOVE** The task of collecting in Aberdeenshire was not only taken up by scholars, for this song appears in the collection of Willie Mathieson, a farm servant. Proud of the local tradition, Willie started collecting while still a schoolboy and eventually amassed over 600 songs, half of them with tunes. Not until 1952 when he was discovered by Hamish Henderson had he ever ventured farther than Stonehaven, a fishing burgh, 15 miles south of Aberdeen. Ian's version is very similar to that of Willie Robbie, the well-known North-east singer.

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**I WISH, I WISH** This song was learnt from Mrs. Cecilia Costello, via the BBC's archive of folk music recordings. Mrs. Costello, like the Campbells, lives in Birmingham. She acquired the ballad from her Irish parents. It is usually known in England as Died of Love and in Aberdeenshire often as The Foolish Young Girl.

**McGINTY'S MEAL-AN'-ALE** An earlier folk-song revival in Buchan at the turn of the century produced a number of local song-writers including George Bruce Thomson, the author of this song. It is a tribute to his feeling for the idiom that it was in circulation even before Gavin Greig printed it in the Buchan Observer. Today, many slight variants, possibly the result of these early orally learned versions, are in common currency and one of these was recorded and subsequently published by the bothy-style entertainer, Willie Kemp, who is often mistakenly described as the author. The tune Thomson used is a variant of the reel Roxburgh, Castle "adapted (and ruined)" as he jokingly put it to Greig.

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