

The Stewarts of Blair

Alex, Belle, Cathie and Sheila Stewart

Traditional ballads, songs and pipe music by one of Scotland's great singing families.

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Recorded by Bill Leader
Notes by Hamish Henderson
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There is a Scots saying that a Stewart is 'either a tinker or sib to the King'. Nobody who knows the Stewarts of Blairgowrie, who spring from a long and famous line of Scots travelling folk, will feel like arguing the toss as to which of these possibilities confers the higher status. By general consent the Stewarts rank high among the singing 'folk' families of Europe and the world, and (as Robert Burns would have agreed) this and similar considerations of sense and merit confer the only patent of nobility worth a docken.

The descendants of 'auld Jimmy Stewart of Struan', who crossed from Perthshire into Aberdeenshire via Glenshee and the Devil's Elbow about the middle of the last century, are now scattered up and down the high roads and the low roads of Scotland, and there is a flourishing colony of them in Canada. There can be few more musically gifted clans or families in all Europe. Pipers, fiddlers, melodeon players, tin whistlers can be counted among them in dozens, and you practically never encounter an indifferent performer.

Alex's father, old John Stewart, was one of the finest pipers in Scotland. He was born at Cromdale, in the North-East, and died in Blairgowrie in June 1956, aged 85. For many years he was piper to the Duke of Atholl, and he won every major pibroch award in the country. An interview with him, recorded by the School of Scottish Studies less than a year before his death, is part of the history of piping in Scotland. He talked in terms of easy familiarity of such men as John MacDonald of Inverness, preceptor to hundreds of pipers: 'If he played a good march, he played a bad pibroch; and if he played a good pibroch, he played a bad march'. Asked who he thought was the finest piper he had ever heard, he replied in the true tradition of Alan Breck Stewart - with due pride, but without the slightest trace of arrogance - that he had never heard a better than himself.

This is the man from whom Alex Stewart learned to play the pipes, and this is the musical yardstick by which Alex's playing and the singing of his family should be judged.

Belle Stewart comes of MacGregor stock - her people, expert tinsmiths, travelled the Perthshire glens with shelties (Highland or Shetland ponies), buying and selling goods, and working on the farms in harvest-time. Her grandfather was brutally murdered by members of another travelling clan, and a feud smoulders between the two to this day. These MacGregors are also notable singers, and Belle has inherited in full measure their artistic gifts and their handsome looks. A Canadian anthropologist Frank Vallee told me in 1955, when he came with me on a field trip to Blairgowrie to record the Stewarts, that after seeing Belle he knew that Sir Walter Scott wasn't romanticising when he described the proud bearing of Helen MacGregor, Rob Roy's wife, and put into her mouth the words: 'My foot is on my native heath, and my name is MacGregor'. He added that Belle was the most majestic-looking person he had ever seen in his life.

Credit for discovering the Stewarts belongs to Blairgowrie-born Maurice Fleming, who has been an invaluable field-worker for the School of Scottish Studies ever since its inception. In 1954 we recorded Belle's song *The Berryfields o' Blair* from a North-East singer - John Macdonald of Pitgaveny, Elgin - who sang it with tremendous gusto but knew nothing of its origin. Maurice was given the task of tracking down the author of the song, and he did so with flamboyant success inside a few weeks. The 'public' history of the Stewart family dates from that first visit that Maurice paid them. The paradoxical truth is, therefore, that the Stewarts became known mainly because one of their songs had become 'anonymous', i.e. had proved itself as a folk song. The 1955 berry-picking season in Blair is a landmark in the

history of folk-song collecting in Scotland. We camped in the Standing Stones raspberryfield, on the road to Essendy - one of the berryfields being 'farmed' at that time by Alex Stewart, and his son Andy - and, thanks to the Stewart family, we were shortly sending S.O.S. signals to Edinburgh for more tape. It was a halcyon summer, and the sun had ensured a record crop, both of songs and berries. Jeannie Robertson came down to join us and we invited Isabel Sutherland to camp alongside us and make recordings. Collecting in the berryfields that year was like holding a tin can under the Niagara Falls. However, when we got back to Auld Reekie and began sizing up what we had collected, it was clear that the really fabulous contribution had been made not so much by the nomadic travellers among whom we had camped as by the Stewart family of Berrybank, the aiders and abettors of the whole operation. Apart from Belle herself, the outstanding singer on the tapes (everyone agreed) was her daughter Sheila. From rare Child ballads like *The Twa Brothers* to comparatively recent American folk-songs like *The Convict's Song* (which you can hear on this record), Sheila unfolded an extraordinary repertoire, displaying the most subtle and sensitive understanding of her material, and the most impressive technical expertise. This was the fine flower of a noble folk tradition. At that time Cathie seemed content to leave Sheila to represent the younger generation, but she has since emerged strongly as a singer in her own right; her performance of *Busk, busk, bonnie lassie* would alone be enough to show that she has inherited the family genius. Alex's pipe accompaniment makes this an unforgettable performance. There are still younger Stewarts, too, of course, but they will have to wait till another record.

HUNTINGTOWER

Belle Stewart

Although popular all over Scotland for 150 years, Huntingtower is invariably associated with Perthshire. The first version on record, printed by Kinloch, is called *The Duke of Athol*. The poetess Lady Nairne produced an undistinguished rendering of her own, but the anonymous version sung by Belle is the one which is now universally popular. It was printed over and over again, in chapbooks and newspapers, and on broadsides, during the 19th century, and Scots singers have carried it round the world. Belle has of course seen it in print quite often, but she first heard it from her cousin Donald MacGregor, who died in 1926. The reference to Germany might suggest an approximate origin in the printed broadsides of the Seven Years War; however, it has been suggested (by Aytoun) that the song derives ultimately from the classic ballad *Richie Storie* (see Child's appendix to No. 232 in ENGLISH AND SCOTTISH POPULAR BALLADS and Gavin Greig, FOLK-SONG OF THE NORTH-EAST, xcv). The present text will be found in Robert Ford's HARP OF PERTHSHIRE 1893, page 121. It is often sung as a duet.

CAROLINE OF EDINBURGH TOWN

Belle Stewart

Another song whose widespread popularity depends to a large extent on print, the 'blooming Caroline' is a favourite of folk singers up and down Scotland, and in many other parts of the English-speaking world. Belle first heard it in Ireland from a singer called Mary Douglas. Greig published a version in his BUCHAN OBSERVER column (FSNE LXX), observing that 'the tragic element is managed with very considerable skill'. The rather lush sentimentality of the language points to broadside origin, but the better variants, such as Belle's have shed some of the stilted diction of the printed versions. Her fine tune lends the song an added elegance and dignity.

IN LONDON'S FAIR CITY

Belle Stewart

Better known as *In Oxford City* or *The Oxford Tragedy*, this song of 'cruel jealousy' re-casts and - so to speak - domesticates the more violent and elemental sexual drama of such medieval ballads as *Lord Thomas and Fair Annet* (Child 73). Gavin Greig collected several versions, and printed one in FSNE (CXXXVII); the redoubtable farm-servant collector Willie Mathieson (born near Ellon, Aberdeenshire, 1880) also has a version in his MS books, which were photostatted by Edinburgh University in April 1952. Belle learnt the song from her sister-in-law, the late Mrs. Bella Higgins of Blairgowrie, who herself recorded a bulky consignment of songs and stories for the School of Scottish Studies in 1955. Bella's version began: 'In Belfast City'.

QUEEN AMANG THE HEATHER

Belle Stewart

This splendid version of a song equally well-known among the Scots farming community and the travelling folk was learnt by Belle when she was still a wee bairn - among the singers to have contributed to her version are old Henry MacGregor of Perth, her cousin Jimmy Whyte and her brother Donald MacGregor. Versions of it used to be as thick as blaberries in Strathmore and the Braes of Angus. It seems to be related to *Ower the Muir amang the Heather*, of which Burns wrote: 'This song is the composition of Jean Glover... I took the song down from her singing as she was strolling through the country with a sleight-of-hand blackguard.' Subsequent collecting makes it almost certain that Jean's version was itself a re-shaping of an older Ettrick song. James Hogg, the Ettrick shepherd produced a version which was in turn modified. Musical and textual evidence however, suggests that - as in the case of *Huntingtower* - a classic ballad lies behind the lyric lovesong. In this case, the progenitor is *Glasgow Peggie* (Child 228), the tunes for which

are clearly related to *Queen Amang the Heather*, and whose story presents a parallel situation - the Highlander who takes the heiress he has carried off and beds her down 'amang the heather' before revealing that he is himself a Chieftain.

DOWIE DENS O' YARROW (Child 214)

Belle Stewart

Gavin Greig wrote in 1909 that this is 'unquestionably the most widely known of our old ballads', and this is still true, as nearly thirty versions in the archives of the School of Scottish Studies testify. Although it is always thought of as a 'border ballad', and the name Yarrow always appears in it, it has been recorded most often in the North-East. Belle's Perthshire tune, which she learnt from an aunt, is a superb vehicle for the narrative. For a discussion of the ancestry of the ballad, see Child (introduction to No. 214). The American scholar, Richard Bauman, is at present bringing this up to date.

THE LAKES O' SHILLIN

Cathie Stewart

Irish songs have enjoyed tremendous popularity in Scots bothies and farm kitchens. Most of them were probably brought over by harvesters and itinerant labourers, though Greig thought that some at least may have been learned by Scots soldiers from Irish comrades-in-arms at camp-fire ceilidhs during the Napoleonic Wars. This is undoubtedly an Irish song in origin - in P. W. Joyce's collection it is called *The Lake of Coolfin* but it has been popular in Aberdeenshire for many years. Cathie learnt it from a North-Easter, Alec Stewart of Buckie. There is a version in FOLK-SONG OF THE NORTH-EAST (article CXIV), and it was in the repertoire of the late John Strachan of Fyvie.

OWER YON HILL THERE LIVES A LASSIE

Cathie Stewart

Cathie learned this haunting song from old Henry MacGregor of Perth, a fine piper and story-teller as well as a singer. The text, with its mysterious overtones, probably derives from a 'night-visiting' song, but elements of another song have got embedded in it. The result is a poignant lyric love-song.

THE CONVICT'S SONG

Sheila Stewart

Like *The Boston Smuggler* and *Come All Ye Texas Rangers*, this is one of the comparatively few American folk songs to enter the repertoire of Scottish traditional singers before the present revival. Sheila learned it from an old woman in Aberdeen.

YOUNG JAMIE FOYERS

Sheila Stewart

Another distinctively Perthshire bothy song, *Jamie Foyers* was printed by Robert Ford in his *VAGABOND SONGS AND BALLADS*, and also by Greig in article CXXXIX of *FSNE*. Greig says he does not think it ever had much vogue in the North-East, but this is not true of the Aberdeenshire travelling folk, among whom it is widely known. Ford comments that it 'was a prime favourite at the harvest homes, foys and Handsel-Monday gatherings in the rural parts of Perthshire before and about the middle of the last century'. There seems every reason to believe that the song is founded on an actual event, and that its hero was a real-life Peninsular War casualty. Ewan MacColl's well-known modernisation makes Jamie an International Brigader. Sheila learned the very handsome tune from her mother.

THE CORNCRAKE AMANG THE WHINNY

Sheila Stewart

An Ayrshire song which has spread to most other parts of Scotland, the Corncrake is clearly the production of quite a sophisticated minor poet. Greig's comment (*FSNE* CLXXV) deserves quoting: 'the writer deserves credit for trying to turn to lyrical account what people in general would think the most unpromising sound of the rural year - the cry of the corncake'.

BUSK, BUSK, BONNIE LASSIE

Cathie Stewart,
accompanied by Alex Stewart

North of Blairgowrie and Alyth rise the Grampians, a convenient refuge for Jacobite armies in retreat, and for eloping lovers. The chorus of this marvellous song links it with the *Braes o' Balquhidder* and with many similar songs of love triumphant among the hills and braes. Greig printed a version called *Oh, No No* (*FSNE* CVII), but it lacks this evocative chorus, much to its disadvantage. The opening of the tune and that of the pipe march *The Bloody Fields of Flanders* are virtually identical. Alex accompanies Cathie on the 'goose', a small set of Highland pipes - bag and chanter, but minus the drones. Alex's father used it for teaching and for practice, as it is easier to play than the chanter alone.

MARCH; STRATHSPEY; REEL

Alex Stewart (pipes)

Like his father, Alex is a virtuoso performer on the Highland war-pipes.

The tunes he plays are:

- (a) Fagail Liosmor (Leaving Lismore):
a Gaelic song played as a slow march.
- (b) March: 74ths Farewell to Edinburgh
- (c) Strathspey: The Shepherd's Crook
- (d) Reel: Miss Proud

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