





# THE TRAVELLING STEWARTS

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- 1 **Johnnie, My Man**  
Lizzie Higgins
- 2 **Willie's Fatal Visit**  
Jeannie Robertson
- 3 **The Battle's O'er; Scotland the Brave; The 51st Division in Egypt**  
Played by Donald and Isaac Higgins, pipes
- 4 **Bogie's Bonnie Belle**  
Jane Stewart
- 5 **McGinty's Meal and Ale**  
Davy Stewart
- 6 **My Bonnie Tammy**  
Christina Stewart
- 7 **MacPherson's Lament**  
Maggie McPhee
- 8 **The Drunken Piper; Brig o' Perth; Reel o' Tulloch**  
Played by Alex Stewart, pipes
- 9 **Loch Dhui**  
Belle Stewart acc. Alex Stewart, goose
- 10 **The Dawning of the Day**  
Cathie Stewart, acc. Alex Stewart, goose
- 11 **Donald's Return to Glencoe**  
Sheila Stewart

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Notes by Carl MacDougall

Photograph by Brian Shuel

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'You'll never see me laughing or shouting at a Pakistani or anybody like that; no, never...  
Long, long years ago when I was a wee boy. my auld mother told me that all travellers came from the same place as these people. and so I never do anything that might offend them. Anyway, they're having a hard time of it. just like the travellers...'  
*Davy Stewart, itinerant singer.*

Davy's amiable remark is more sympathetic than accurate. He had in mind the theory, almost surely correct, that the original homeland of the gypsies is in North-West India. What is incorrect is the notion that other nomadic or semi-nomadic people - 'travellers', 'tinkers', call them what you will - are related to the Romanies. They may share their way of life to a certain extent, and have some of the same customs and beliefs, but they're a separate and distinct people. We don't know how long non-gypsy travellers have been roaming the lanes and highways of England, Scotland and Ireland, but they have certainly been on the road since the Middle Ages, and their numbers have been appreciably added to, from time to time, as a result of political, social and economic disaster. For example, when the followers of Prince Charles Edward Louis Phillippe Casimir Stuart (known to romantics as Bonnie Prince Charlie and to historians as The Young Pretender) were defeated at Culloden Moor in 1746 there followed a ruthless military occupation of the Highlands. Whole families were dispersed under the autocratic fist of the butcher Cumbernauld, and many of them took to a roving itinerant life.

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Later the mass evictions of Highland crofters now known as the Clearances, where sheep usurped men in the minds of the land-owners, helped swell the ranks of the 'travellers'. The evictions were followed by an orgy of tartan romanticism which we Scots have not yet recovered from; and this was followed by an orgy of 'gypsy' romanticism. Just as every Scot had a kindly, tartan-clad granny in a wee cottage in the Highlands, so every lane and by-way harboured a weatherbeaten, violin-playing gypsy or tinker who lived in a picturesque, wooden, hand-painted caravan.

In an article on 'The Tinkers' by Charles Godfrey Leland published in the Gypsy Lore Society Journal of July 1907, the writer, having made the very possible suggestion that the tinker is 'a descendant of the early, in fact prehistoric, guild of bronze-workers' reaches the conclusion that:

'the tinker fraternity of Great Britain existed with perhaps nearly all its ancient characteristics, as did that of the Gypsies, unbroken and little mixed with foreign blood... Now one and the other are vanishing rapidly, and with them so much that once gave a peculiar charm to nature. When there may be... perhaps a hundred bicycles or automobilia where there was one cavalier or pedestrian of old, then indeed the last Tinkers or Gypsies may well sing, "'Tis time for us to go".'

The 'tinkers' and travellers, like the gypsies, have been persecuted and discriminated against but yet they have managed to survive. The family and the home even if it's a mobile home - still constitute for them a social unit at a time when social organisation is determined by production and in a community where they enjoy none of the perks shared by workers of an industrial society.

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By tradition, they are a skilled people, dependent on no one; metal workers, weavers, mechanics and handymen. They hawk their wares from door to door; selling often no more than flowers made from crepe paper, kitchen utensils and clothes pegs; making a living from tinware, baskets, floor mats, needles and reels of thread; turning their hand to industrial labouring and harvesting. But mass production has taken away the basket-trade and there is no demand for someone who can mend pots and pans. The advent of the machine has hit the traveller, his family and his way of life. When they have served their usefulness to the community, they are driven on. A heavily urbanised and socially regulated country like this can find no room for the social 'misfits': we have no time to understand the non-conformist. Local councils have legislated against the traveller and his camping ground, forcing him further along the road in a pointless nomadic existence. The picturesque, wooden, hand-painted caravan of romance is often in reality a mobile wooden shack or a cart with tentlike hump made from tarpaulins and bowed branches. Mention housing and local officials talk of the problems of 'integration' and say the matter is 'extremely complicated'. Council officials come to gaze on where the tinkers have to live, but few venture inside the huts to see how they live.

Travellers also talk of 'integration', but from them the word is bitter and reminds one of a hopeless submission to adversity. They are rejected by the communities they want to become part of. Some persist, but no matter how long they live in one house they are often in the end still regarded as undesirable by communities charged with fear and prejudice. The theory is that the travellers are uneducated, dirty in habits, thievish by nature. Well, some of them are (what community is free from ignorance, uncleanliness, dishonesty?).

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Mostly, they're as well-informed and well-ordered as any other people. But one thing they have that most communities have lost. Culturally conservative, and obliged by circumstance to provide most of their own entertainment, they are today the best preservers and bearers of folk song in England and Scotland; likewise they are the custodians of many classic folk tales, and are exceptionally skilful in the narrator's art. Here then, are some of the finest of the Scottish 'traveller' singers, all members and relatives of the vast nomad Stewart clan - 'descendants of a royal house', some say, though there's more romance than history about the claim - that grew up on the roads and by-ways following the collapse of the old Highland order after 1745.

Belle Stewart, her husband Alex, and their daughters Sheila and Cathie are well known to folk-song club audiences throughout the country; in the sleeve notes to their Topic L.P. 'The Stewarts of Blair' (TSDL138), Hamish Henderson says 'that by general consent the Stewarts rank high among the singing 'folk' families of Europe.' Jeannie Robertson, who is to be heard on another Topic L.P. TSDL052. is joined by her daughter Lizzie Higgins, husband Donald and Brother-in-law Isaac. Here Davy Stewart makes his recording debut for Topic as does his daughter Jane and cousin Christina. Maggie McPhee is in her late seventies and although virtually crippled with arthritis, her singing manages to convey a lusty appetite for life.

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### **JOHNNIE, MY MAN**

This song, which appears in Robert Ford's 'Vagabond Songs and Ballads' (second series) and John Ord's 'Bothy Songs and Ballads', was according to Ord a 'favourite street song all over Scotland in the sixties and seventies'. Ford notes that it 'found ready sale always in penny-sheet form, chiefly among those who required most its pointed moral lesson.'

### **WILLIE'S FATAL VISIT**

This ballad is from Peter Buchan's 'Ballads of the North of Scotland', and is numbered 255 by Professor Child. The full story is of a maid who, inquiring after her lover, is told that he will be with her that night. The lover, Willie, is admitted and given the option of cards, dice, wine or bed. He chooses the latter, which, in Child's opinion, is 'a too familiar commonplace in Buchan's ballads.' The maid, Meggie, charges the cock not to crow today, with the promise that:

'your kame shall be o the gude red gowd.  
and your wings o the siller grey'.

However, the cock crows an hour too soon. Willie dresses, leaves his love and on the road home meets with a ghost, who smiles on him. 'The ghost tears him to pieces, and hangs a bit "on every seat" of Mary's kirk, the head right over Meggie's pew! Meggie rives her yellow hair'. Jeannie's version takes up the story from Willie leaving Meggie. The implication that the ghost is Willie's former sweetheart is not in the Buchan version.

### **THE BATTLE'S O'ER; SCOTLAND THE BRAVE; THE 51ST DIVISION IN EGYPT**

A selection of pipe tunes, still popular despite the plunderings of Tin Pan Alley. Donald plays the whistle and Isaac the mouth-organ.

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### **BOGIE'S BONNIE BELLE**

Jane Stewart learned this song from her father. The story of the snobbish farmer whose daughter has a child to a farm hand and ultimately marries a tinker is still well known throughout the North-East of Scotland and is, naturally enough, relished among travellers.

### **McGINTY'S MEAL AND ALE**

Davy Stewart reckons this was one of the first songs he learned, and he has sung it from Aberdeen's Castlegate to Glasgow's Stow Street market - and everywhere else he has been. Gavin Greig gives the song in 'Folk-Song of the North-East'. It was written by George Bruce Thomson of New Deer, Aberdeenshire, and, like 'Bogie's Bonnie Belle', is still popular.

### **MY BONNIE TAMMY**

We are all familiar with what Bronson calls a 'spirited parody of Lord Randal'; the 'Billie Boy' group of songs in which a young man answers questions, some of doubtful delicacy, about his sweetheart. Heading Bronson's appendix to 'Lord Randal' is 'My Boy Tammy' from Johnson's 'Musical Museum'. Christina Stewart's song would appear to be a greatly pruned variant of the song from Johnson.

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### MACPHERSON'S LAMENT

There are, of course, many versions of this song and many accounts of MacPherson, but in the circumstances, Robert Ford's note is very revealing: "This rare old rant... is said to have been written by the notorious freebooter... while he lay under sentence of death in the fall of the year 1700. After holding the counties of Aberdeen, Banff, and Moray, in fear for a number of years, MacPherson was seized by Duff of Braco, ancestor of the Earl of Fife, and along with certain gypsies who had been taken in his company, was tried before the Sheriff of Banffshire, and convicted of being "repute an Egyptian and vagabond, and oppressor of His Majesty's free leiges, in bangstre manner." When brought to the place of execution, on the Gallows Hill of Banff, on the 16th November, in the year named, he played on his violin, says report, the stirring tune he had composed for these words in the condemned cell, and then asked if any friend 'was present who would accept the instrument as a gift at his hands. No one coming forward, he indignantly broke the violin on his knee and threw away the fragments, after which he submitted to his fate.'

### THE DRUNKEN PIPER; BRIG O' PERTH; REEL O' TULLOCH

Those who have heard "The Stewarts of Blair" on record or in club performance will need no introduction to Alex's piping. Here he plays a march, strathspey and reel.

### LOCH DHUI

As well as being distinguished as a singer, Belle is also a song writer and she wrote these words to the first part of the tune 'Loch Dhui'. Alex accompanies her on 'the goose', a smaller edition of the bagpipes, comprising bag and chanter.

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### THE DAWNING OF THE DAY

This song was printed in Edward Walsh's 'Popular Irish Songs' (1847). In 1873 when Dr. P. W. Joyce included it in his collection 'Ancient Irish Music' he noted that it used to be sung as a 'street ballad' and was 'still well-known in the southern counties'. John Ord includes it in his collection and a rewritten version appears in Frank Kidson's 'Folk Songs from the North Countrie'. More recently, Edith Fowke has a very interesting version, as sung by Mrs. Arlington Fraser, in 'Traditional Singers and Songs from Ontario'.

### DONALD'S RETURN TO GLENCOE

A very popular member of the 'broken token' family of songs. Gavin Greig includes it in 'Folk-Song of the North-East', both Robert Ford and John Ord have it in their collections and Frank Kidson gives a fragment of the tune in 'Traditional Tunes'.

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