

Princess of the Thistle

Lizzie Higgins

Scots Songs and Ballads

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Elizabeth Higgins, or Lizzie as she is always called, was born in the Geiest Row in the centre of Aberdeen in 1929. She is the daughter of Jeannie Robertson, the world-renowned ballad singer. Her family on both sides were travellers, but Lizzie never knew the old life and her upbringing was largely that of an ordinary city-bred girl. By an oddity of fate, she was born in part of the former garrison of the black Duke of Cumberland, the man who persecuted and dispossessed so many of her ancestors.

Her early years were spent in Aberdeen, though she lived for a time during the war in Banchory, 17 miles outside the city. She remembers the singing of her mother from childhood and also of her grandmother, Maria Robertson, from whom Jeannie has much of her repertoire. Relatives say that Lizzie much resembles Maria and perhaps this also applies to her singing, for Jeannie, in describing her mother's voice, says that it was mellower than her own, a description also applicable to Lizzie.

Lizzie's education followed the usual rigorous Scottish pattern with its accent on rectitude rather than imagination. The art songs she came across at school were not like those she already knew, and she rejected them. However, she did like poetry and was chosen to represent her school in a poetry reading competition. She has the same sharp mind and intellectual curiosity as her mother and prides herself on having been a good scholar. But this proved no help in earning a living, and Lizzie took up the hard job of fish filleter when she left school at fifteen. Like many such occupations for working women there is little job security and it is important to be noticed as 'a good worker', willing to put in terribly long hours so as not to be laid off in slack times. Even so conscientious a worker as Lizzie found herself unemployed often enough and had to take up casual agricultural work.

To compensate for the rigours of her life Lizzie has always had strong family ties and most of her singing has been done in informal family ceilidhs, particularly along with relatives from Peterhead, including the fine fiddler, Albert Stewart. Her songs are by no means limited to those of her immediate family circle. Often she would learn just the words of songs and set them to pipe airs which her father played to her. She is particularly fond of the pipes and models much of her singing style on pipe music. Her version of *The College Boy, Far Ower The Forth* and *The Cruel Mother* are from this source.

Lizzie's musical interests are by no means limited to folk song, and she likes many types of popular music, traditional jazz in particular. Perhaps this breadth of taste has made her seem, to some eyes, un-typical as a folk singer, and has led collectors to ignore her when visiting her mother. Such narrowness of view is commoner among the enthusiasts than the practitioners of folk music. Another factor that has caused Lizzie's talents to remain hidden is her shyness, which she has only overcome within the last year or so. She did appear on recordings issued in America some years ago, which attracted the attention of a few specialists; also she broadcast once or twice; but she was never able to screw up enough courage to appear at a folk song club. Some friends contrived to arrange for her to participate in a concert on the fringe of the Edinburgh Festival, but when she heard of their plan she caught the first train back to Aberdeen. However, a year ago she overcame her timidity and sang at the Aberdeen Folk Festival, where she made an immediate and deep impression. Since then, she has excited and charmed audiences with her singing in England and Wales as well as Scotland.

No doubt there is a promising future for Lizzie Higgins, a young woman with the advantages of a thorough traditional background and the outlook of a modern city-raised woman. Her singing certainly shows the influence of her mother, Jeannie Robertson, but there are also very definite differences, particularly in the amount and type of decoration she uses. Lizzie has a much more lyrical repertoire and her approach is ideally suited to her choice of songs, with flowing grace notes giving a rounded contour to the tunes. This is particularly evident when she sings a song like *Young Emsley* and embellishes its rather rudimentary phrases to give them an intensity not present in other singers' versions of this variant of the song. Here then is Lizzie Higgins, a living proof of the continuity of traditional music and a singer who will probably be as important to the next decade of the folk music revival as her famous mother has been to the one that's just over.

Wha's at the Windy?

This song usually appears as a children's piece and in a very fragmentary form. From these versions the song was related to the night-visiting group but Lizzie's much fuller set puts it closer to *The False Bride* and others of this type.

Lovely Molly

Gavin Greig, the great Scottish collector, rightly criticised the widely held belief that the sentimental Jacobite songs of Lady Caroline Nairne, Lady Jane Scott and others of their kind, could claim to be folk songs. He went so far as to say that there were no truly traditional songs of the Jacobite risings, and indeed the majority of those sung by revival singers are from printed sources such as Hogg's 'Jacobite Relics'. He was, however, overstating his case for there are a number of pieces like the present song which is from the time of the Old Pretender. As in most such examples, the political interest is small and the love interest great.

The Fair of Balnafannon

A number of songs exist of love among the heather, and as they all postdate *The Laird o' Drum* and echo this ballad in both sentiment and setting there is good reason to believe that this is their parent. *The Fair of Balnafannon* seems to be an adaptation of the older *Braes o' Balquhidder* in both melody and text. Other related songs are *Queen among the Heather*, *Skippin Barfit through the Heather* and *Lovely Nancy*.

Young Emsley

This is probably an English song which has come up the coast with the expanding fishing trade in the 19th century. It has been known in North-east Scotland for at least 60 years and almost always to a similar air as the one which Lizzie sings. The stanza-form is rather different from the usual English version, and this may be due to rewriting by a broadside printer, for such radical changes are unusual in the course of oral dissemination.

Bonny Udney

The theme and form of this song facilitate its attachment to any locality, and versions are known under a variety of names: *Yarmouth is a Pretty Town*, *Bonny Portmore*, *The Boys of Kilkenny*, etc. This has led to a proliferation which makes identification of origins both difficult and hazardous, although perhaps one might guess at an Irish ancestry. In Christie's 'Traditional Ballad Airs', 1881, the song was given as *Bonny Portmore* and it was probably an earlier relative of this that Robert Burns used as the basis of *My Heart's in the Highlands*. The tune also does service for a recruiting song of Irish derivation, *Johnny Gallagher*.

Far Ower the Forth

The same song appears in James Johnson's 'The Scots Musical Museum' 1787. Lizzie has the words from a printed source but uses a pipe tune from her father's repertoire as the air.

The Laird O' the Dainty Doonby

This broad and engaging ballad did not at all suit Professor Child's somewhat fastidious taste and so did not appear in his famous anthology 'The English and Scottish Popular Ballads'. More's the pity. Surprisingly enough he does include *The Wylie Wife of the Hie Toun Hie* which tells a similar tale with the added impropriety of having a landlady acting as procuress. Herd, in his 'Ancient and Modern Scots Songs' published the ballad, as well as a very similar piece *The Young Laird o' Keltie*. Both songs still enjoy considerable popularity in North-east Scotland.

The Seasons

Like many such 'Calendar' songs this is probably of literary origin, later taken into oral currency. If this is so the tune has certainly been freely adapted by the traditional singers who have had it in their keeping.

Davie Faa

Some versions of *The Jolly Beggar* (Child No. 279) begin by revealing that the beggar or tinker is in reality a nobleman or at least well-off. This lends credibility to the notion that *Davie Faa* is a version of the Child ballad. The family of Faa was once well known in southern Scotland and the stealing of the lady in *The Gypsy Laddie* is often attributed to them. A number of well known tunes are used for the song including *Tramps and Hawkers* and *The Banks of Sweet Dundee*.

The Banks of Red Roses

In Ireland and England this is a love song in which the wayward hero produces a symbolic instrument, fiddle, tune-box, flute or even tuning fork, with which he serenades his girl. A version close to the English sets was collected by Gavin Greig in North-east Scotland but the most popular version in Scotland today has Johnny murdering his sweetheart. This change is probably the result of fusion between the former song and a 19th century broadside ballad.

The Maid of Glenshee

There are numerous songs centering around a love match between highlander and lowlander. The difficulty of such a union, always rehearsed in detail before being finally overcome, emphasises the wide difference between these two regions of Scotland. The air, in use for many traditional songs, is a variant of *The Road and the Miles to Dundee*.

The College Boy

This moving song, known variously as *The Bonny Boy is Lang Lang a' Growin* and *The Trees they do Grow High* is popularly supposed to have had a factual basis in an arranged marriage in the early 17th century. However, such marriages were once so common that to pick out one in particular seems entirely arbitrary. Tradition has it that the ballad is originally Scots but there is little concrete evidence of this and a number of the musical variants suggest an Irish ancestry. Lizzie's tune is a fine and fitting pipe air.

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