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DAVIE STEWART

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1. MacPherson's Rant

James MacPherson, most famous of Scottish outlaws, was the illegitimate son of a Highland laird, MacPherson of Invereshie, and a beautiful tinkler-gypsy girl he met at a wedding. Jamie was brought up in his father's house, and it is related that "he grew up to beauty, strength and stature rarely equalled." He became an expert swordsman, and a renowned fiddler. After the death of his father – Invereshie was killed while attempting to recover cattle stolen by reivers – Jamie was reclaimed by his mother's people, and eventually became the leader of the band. They lived, as their descendants still do, by buying and selling the means of transport (horses then, second-hand cars now), and seem to have been quite popular with the ordinary country folk. However, MacPherson incurred the enmity of the rich lairds and farmers of the low country of Banff and Aberdeenshire, and especially of a brash go-getter Duff of Braco who organised a posse to catch him. At Saint Rufus Fair in Keith he was attacked by Braco's men, and was captured after a fierce fight. (According to the traditional account, a woman dropped a blanket over him from a window, and he was disarmed before he could get free of it.)

It was still at that time a criminal offence merely to be an Egyptian (Gypsy) in Scotland, and it was under this statute that MacPherson was tried in November

1700. *A procès-verbal* of his trial is still extant; the following is the text of the death sentence:

"Forasmeikle, as you James McPherson, pannal (accused) are found guilty by ane verdict of ane assyse, to be knoun, holden, and repute to be Egiptian and a wagabond, and oppressor of his Magesties free lieges in ane bangstrie manner, and going up and down the country armed, and keeping mercats in ane hostile manner, and that you are a thief, and that you are of pessimae fama. Therfor, the Sheriff-depute of Banff, and I in his name, adjudges and discernes you the said James McPherson to be taken to the Cross of Banff, from the tolbooth thereof, where you now lye, and there upon ane gibbet to be erected, to be hanged by the neck to the death by the hand of the common executioner, upon Friday next, being the 16th of November instant, being a public weekly mercat day, betwixt the hours of two and three in the afternoon...."

While under sentence of death MacPherson is said to have composed the tune of the Rant, and he is also said to have played it under the gallows, and then to have broken it either across his knee or over the executioner's head. It is universally believed in the North-East that a reprieve was on its way to Banff at

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the time of the execution, and that the town clock was put forward a quarter of an hour so that MacPherson could be hanged before the reprieve arrived. The Laird of Grant is mentioned in the song because he attempted to secure the release of two men captured with MacPherson, by claiming that they were subject to his hereditary feudal jurisdiction. He is referred to as “that Highland sant” (i.e., saint) because unlike the MacPhersons he was a staunch Protestant and a militant partisan of King William, whose cause he had supported with three hundred men at the Battle of the Haughs of Cromdale (1690).

MacPherson’s Rant has naturally been a permanent favourite with the travelling people, and Davie always sang it with tremendous pride and panache. (He almost seemed to dance as well as sing the chorus.) His text, like Jimmy McBeath’s, is a descendant of a broadside execution ballad about MacPherson which was probably on sale either at or soon after the execution. It has been held to be appreciably superior, as poetry, to Robert Burns’s celebrated braggadocio re-write. Again, the popular voice attributes the original broadside text to MacPherson himself.

Davie’s approach to the Rant was always highly fluid and improvisatory. He had a stock of verses which he would sing in any order that suited him, and they

seldom came out the same way twice; sometimes he would think up new verses on the spur of the moment – as, in this case, the verse about the “English law.”

Those wishing to compare separate recordings of the song by Davie can do so by referring to the LP “The Berryfields of Blair” (Prestige-International INT 25016). Other recordings may be consulted in the sound archive of The School of Scottish Studies.

The tune continues to intrigue Scottish musicians. The first performance of two pieces – by Lyell Cresswell and Martin Dalby – both entitled “MacPherson’s Rant” was given at The Third Eye Centre, Glasgow, by The New Music Group of Scotland (21 Oct 1977).

2. **The Jolly Beggar** (Child 270)

Another favourite of the travelling people, this classic ballad is always associated in popular tradition with James V (father of Mary Queen of Scots), about whom a number of stories of the Haroun-al-Raschid type are told. The most celebrated of these is the Gudeman of Ballengiech, this being the alias which the King is reputed to have taken when roving around disguised as a commoner (cf Sir Walter Scott, *Tales of a Grandfather* 1st Series, XXVII, page 287). Lord Byron, whose mother was a Gordon of Gight, and who

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spent his childhood in Aberdeen, took the chorus of an “ancestor” of this particular version of the ballad as starting-off point for one of his most famous poems “So, we’ll go no more a-roving”. Not long ago Adrian Henri carried the “folk literary” process a stage further by adapting Byron’s poem to suit “the swinging 60s”. (“We’ll go no more a-raving”.)

Davie again exhibits his exceedingly free-flown and plastic approach to ballad singing – one shared with many other travelling people who are much more at home with speech and song than with print. This performance of the ballad took place in my own kitchen in 1962, and the last stanza was improvised while my wife was making us a pot of tea.

3. Canterling

There are two main types of lilting in Scottish folk tradition. One, usually called diddling, is associated with fiddle tunes. The other, called cantering (from Gaelic *canntaireachd*) is used for singing pipe tunes. This latter is a by-blow descendant of the ancient sung notation of “pibroch” – *ceol mòr*, the “great music” of the pipes – in which the notes and figurations of the “ground” and variations were represented by more or less fixed vocables. Modern pipers often employ a kind of broken down *canntaireachd* when singing pipe tunes, although this is far from being systemised. On this track Davie

canters a pipe-march **The 74th Highlanders’ Farewell to Edinburgh**; a strathspey **The Piper’s Bonnet**; and a reel **Mrs MacLeod of Raasay**.

4. I’m Often Drunk and I’m Seldom Sober

When Davie was travelling through Ireland, he picked up a large number of items – this one is a rather curious composite effusion, a blend of a nostalgic love song and a “night visiting song” (one of the courtship songs which have closed and often deceptive links with revenant ballads like “The Grey Cock”). The girl’s name, Molly Bawn (blonde Molly) bobs up all over the place in Irish popular literature; it is the name commonly associated with the song-type which has as its central theme the hunter who mistakes his love for a swan. On another level, it is the name conscripted by Samuel Lover, a 19th century stage Irish poetaster-entertainer, for a classic piece of inane doggerel.

Some years ago Tom Munnely collected from the late John Reilly a version of a night-visiting song in which the name Molly Bawn occurs, and this song may well be related under the covers to Davie’s mixer-maxter. John’s version can be heard on his LP “The Bonny Green Tree” (Topic 12T359). The most familiar Scottish version is, of course, “I’m a rover and seldom sober”, which was collected in 1952 in Davie’s own native Aberdeenshire from the scholar-ploughman

Willie Mathieson.

5. Jigs on the Melodeon

In some ways Davie was a sort of one-man “Boys of the Lough”, in that he synthesised in himself the sibling traditions of Scottish and Irish folk music. While he was busking for cinema queues in Dundee, he often played his own fantastical arrangements of Irish dance tunes, and the two interwoven jigs on this track are a good example of what used to emerge. They are **Taghter Jack Walsh** (Taghter = Gaelic “an t-Athair”, ie. Father), and **The Connaughtman’s Ramble**. Davie’s own name for the first of these was “Old Lochie Walsh”.

6. The Overgate

This ever popular bothy ballad is best known in the Aberdeenshire version, with a “ricky doo dum day” chorus, which Jeannie Robertson used to sing, but it is undoubtedly a south country song – probably of Fife origin. The Overgate was a street in Dundee, the “Reeperbahn” target for ploughmen on the lookout for a good night on the tiles. Davie used to repeat the old joke about Dunkeld being all hills and moors, and Dundee being just the opposite, and indeed that was exactly what the Overgate was like in the old days. (It has vanished completely in Dundee’s post war town-
eviscerating orgy.) Davie’s tune is quite closely

related to the one Jean Redpath got from her mother in Leven, Fife, and also to Belle Stewart’s (from Blairgowrie, Perthshire).

Until it was pulled down, the Overgate was also famous for a shop called The Poet’s Box, which did a roaring trade in chapbooks and broadsides.

7. The Merchant’s Son

A Scottish version of a song first printed in 1723 in *A Collection of Old Ballads* (Vol. II, page 228). Its title there is ‘The Merchant’s Son and the Beggar Wench of Hull’. An exceedingly beautiful fragment of this same song was recorded in 1952 from the late John Strachan of Crichton, near Fyvie, Aberdeenshire. The tune is well known in Northern Ireland as that of “The Doffin Mistress”.

The liking of the travelling people for this song is very understandable. The “Gadgie’s lowie” is travellers’ cant for “the man’s money”. In Thomas Harman’s *A Caveat for Common Cursitors* – a book which contains a glossary of 16th century English thieves’ slang – “lowie” appears as “lour”. (“Bing we to Romeville to nip a bung, and get some lour for the boozing ken” means, “Let’s go to London and steal a purse to get some money for the pub”.) The modern “lolly” is clearly related to both lowie and lour.

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This recording was made in the house of the late James Ross, a Skye man who did a lot of valuable field work for the School of Scottish Studies. The other voice heard in the chorus is my own.

8. The Daft Piper

Undoubtedly the most famous of all Davie's showpieces, "The Daft Piper" (which is sung to the tune of "The Drunken Piper") is a mixture of song and monologue which can be heard in variants all over Scotland. It was very popular in Highland regiments during World War II; I remember a Seaforth pipe-major giving a swaggerstick account of it on the Anzio beach-head. It belongs to a long tradition of songs and poems which subject the Highlander's English to gentle – or not so gentle – ridicule. However, Davie identifies so completely with his historic hero that in this case the bobble is on the other bunnet.

9. Boolavogue

This martial song about the exploits of Fr John Murphy, audacious leader of the United Irishmen of Co. Wexford in 1798, was written by P. J. McCall (1861-1919), and was first published in *The Irish Weekly Independent* in June 1898 – exactly a hundred years after the final battles of the rising. It draws on phrases and ideas from contemporary '98 ballads such as "Come All You Warriors and Renowned Nobles" ("Father Murphy of the County Wexford")

and "Some treat of David, that valiant hero" (Songs 10 and 11 in George-Denis Zimmermann's *Irish Political Street Ballads and Rebel Songs, 1780-1900*, Geneva, 1966). For a full account of Fr Murphy's victories at Camolin, Oulart and Enniscorthy, and of his subsequent defeat and death, see Thomas Pakenham *The Year of Liberty* (London 1969). It is clear from the record that this village priest was a natural military leader, and under him the Wexford pikemen performed prodigies of valour.

That Davie's version was, as might be expected, obtained orally is attested by the many verbal alterations (eg. "Tulbereening" for "Tubberneering") in the text. His tune is "Youghal Harbour", the one now universally used for this song.

10. Hornpipe on Melodeon

This tune is called **Harvest Home**, and is very popular with Scottish country dance bands. In Northumbria it is known (according to Ray Fisher) as *The Clog Hornpipe*, as it is a favourite of the Geordie-land clog dancers.

11. The Dowie Dens o'Yarrow

Davie's performance of a classic Border Ballad (Child 214) seems to me to be – instrumentally, at least – the most extraordinary and the most impressive thing in the present album. It alone would provide evidence

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that at his best Davie was a folk musician of immense creative power.

“The Dowie Dens” (which Child called “The Braes of Yarrow”) is still one of the best-loved ballads in the Scottish countryside. It has been collected quite literally from the Border to the Pentland Firth. Willie Scott’s Dumfriesshire version can be heard on “The Shepherd’s Song” (Topic12T183), and a North-East version (from Morayshire) is on John MacDonald’s “Singing Molecatcher” LP (Topic 12TS263). The listener is referred to Child and Bronson for exhaustive articles on the textual and musical records of this world famous ballad.

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