

Belle Stewart

Queen Among The Heather

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First published by Topic 1977
Recorded by Fred Kent at Blairgowrie, May 1976
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Back sleeve photography by Mike Yates
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It is generally agreed by folklorists that the Scottish travelling folk are among our finest oral tradition bearers, be it song or tale. Many of these 'tinker' families claim direct descent from the dispossessed and scattered clans who supported the losing side at the Battle of Culloden, 1746. Belle is of traveller stock: proud, dignified and a distinguished maintainer of noble traditions. A singer, songwriter and poet, Belle is a member of the Stewart Family who, in the words of Hamish Henderson, 'rank high among the singing folk families of Europe'

Belle was born on 18 July 1906 in a 'wee bow-tent' by the side of the River Tay at Caputh, a few miles from Blairgowrie. That very morning her father, Donald McGregor, was pearl fishing on the Tay. Times were particularly hard, but by great good fortune her father discovered a large pearl which he sold for the princely sum of £5 to a wealthy 'fishing' tourist who had observed the proceedings. That morning, says Belle, 'what wae a new bairn, ma mither fine, and a £5 note, there was nae a happier family in the whole o' Scotland. . .'

Queen Among the Heather

There are many fine variants, both musically and textually, of this class of courtship song in the Scots oral tradition. The version from the late Jessie Murray of Banff, *Skippin Barfit thru' the Heather*, springs immediately to mind. A good printed version, quite close in text to Belle's way of it, appears in Colm O Lochlainn's 'More Irish Street Ballads' under the title *Doon the Moor*. This lyric song, although complete in itself, most likely has its story origin in the classic ballad *Glasgow Peggy* (Child 228). Belle's tune is a close relation to the set of tune variants for *Glasgow Peggy* printed in Gavin Greig's 'Last Leaves of Traditional Ballad and Ballad Airs'. Belle learned tune and text from her brother Donald.

Here's a Health to All True Lovers

Belle learned this version of a 'night-visiting' song from her mother-in-law. The night-visit custom is found in several cultures and has given birth to many songs in the Scots and English traditions. The custom has its basis in the consummation of marriage, with parental approval on the evening before the wedding day. It is clear that Belle's lyric version is an ancestor of *The Grey Cock* (lover's ghost) where the girl is visited by the spirit of her sweetheart. In a note to *The Grey Cock* A L Lloyd has written that it is unusual to find the 'bedroom window' and the 'cockcrow' themes present in the one song. In this derivative we have both; however, the cockcrow has lost its supernatural significance of calling the ghost back to the grave. In Belle's version the 'servants' referred to in the last verse are, by implication at least, farm servants. In the more robust 'drinking song' version, collected in the North East of Scotland, *I'm a Rover*, the last line leaves no doubt: 'Remember I'm a ploughman And the fairmer I must obey'

Betsy Belle

The eternal plight of the old maid left 'Hingin On the Nail' unwed and unwanted in spite of noble efforts has given rise to countless popular songs of the 'tragi-comic' variety. Such songs were widely available in broadsheet form. Indeed, Belle learned this song from a penny songsheet purchased at the 'Poets' Box' in the Old-Overgate, Dundee in 1912. With her brother Donald she was on a day-visit to the City from the flax-fields of Fife where they were working at the seasonal 'pulling'. Back at their belltents in the evening they experimented with suitable tunes. After a 'wee dab' at this and that they settled on a popular music-hall tune-of-the-day *We Parted on the Shore*, a song sung by the now internationally known Harry Lauder.

The Berryfields Of Blair

It is a remarkable fact that this composition of Belle's written in 1930 and set to the *Queer Folk O' the Shaws* or *Pair o' Nicky Tams* tune had entered the anonymous stream of oral tradition before the authoress was known. The song was first recorded by Hamish Henderson of the School of Scottish Studies of Edinburgh University in 1954 from the singing of John MacDonald of Pitgaveny. Further enquiries about the song led fellow research worker from the School, Maurice Fleming, to Blairgowrie where he discovered Belle, the authoress, along with her immensely talented 'Stewart Family'. The fruit-picking time (July/August), in spite of increased mechanisation, is still one of the high points in the travellers' yearly round of seasonal farm-work, along with potatoes and turnip picking. As is evident from the song, not all the harvesters are, or were, 'travellers'. For example, it was 'a regular thing for five hundred miners to come' with a specially reserved camping field every year at the 'Loon Braes'. To people who have met Belle, and not least 'the folk at the dinner-hour in the tattie fields' who first heard Belle singing it, the song is of more than general social interest. It is infused with something of her deep compassion for working people, shrewd perception of human frailty and infectious good humour.

The Soft Country Chiel (The Toon o' Dalry)

Stories of the misadventures of country folk abound in the Scots and English traditions. Quite often songs on this theme have a warning or moralistic element but there is no evidence that the warnings are ever heeded! Belle learned this distinctive version from her older brother Donald, fourteen years her senior, who in turn learned it from his father. Belle was only seven months old when her father died. He was obviously a most important song carrier and it is generally agreed among the family 'there wasn't a singer like him in the whole o' Scotland'. The train reference in the song most likely locates the 'Dalry' as the one in Ayrshire. We can date the song from the mid-nineteenth century when the Glasgow and South Western Railway was formed 'by a fusion of certain rail companies previously operating'. The splendid air is a variant of *The Hills o' Glenorchy*.

Whistlin at the Ploo'

This song was written by Belle in 1954 and set to a slight variant of the handsome pentatonic tune best known as *Tramps and Hawkers*. It was inspired by the unusual - with mechanization untypical - sight of a lad ploughing with two 'white' horses at a local farm. Belle's husband, Alec, was gaffering (supervising) a squad of potato-pickers - of whom Belle was one - in an adjacent field. Belle, borrowing Alec's notebook, composed the song that afternoon, 'the quickest one I ever made up'.

The Bonnie Wee Lassie frae Gourock

Belle first heard this spirited narrative from a cousin, 'also a Donald McGregor', but, in fact, learned it from a penny broadside sold at 'The Poets' Box' in the now demolished Old Overgate of Dundee. Belle simply 'liked the story' and learned it when she was fifteen or so, a time when she was taking 'an even greater interest in singing'. It is set to a variant of the Gaelic tune *Mo Dhachaidh* (my home). Belle's family were mainly seasonal farm workers and did little hawking i.e. selling round the doors. The Old Overgate was 'a great place' for good-quality - even if secondhand - workers' clothing.

The Overgate

Belle learned this rollicking song in her teens, three verses from her cousin, the rest from Jimmy Whyte, a traveller friend of the family. There is a certain irony that the girl in the story should 'lose her maidenhead' in the Old Overgate - a delightful ambiguity. This locale in Dundee was famous or notorious for its lowffs (brothels). 'Ye could get anything in the Overgate especially a nice young girl; they were specially obligin'. It may be that this song is an ingeniously improvised and, of course, highly localised relative of the song *As I Roved Out* which is so widespread in the Scots, English and Anglo-Irish tradition. There is certainly textual and musical evidence to support this view. Belle has three mysterious verse intrusions which appear to belong to another song of the 'Cornkister' variety. This is a common species in the North-Easterly part of Scotland and deals with social relations on specific farms.

Blooming Caroline o' Edinburgh Toon

This is one of the most widespread and popular songs of the broadside variety which has entered the oral tradition. A measure of its popularity can be gleaned from the proud announcement on a penny sheet published by the famous 'Poets' Box' of 6 St Andrew's Lane, Glasgow where, on 11 May 1861, it declared its third issue of 10,000 copies since July 1857. Belle learned this song from an Irish girl at a campsite near Strabane, Co Tyrone. The tune is an obvious variant of *Tramps and Hawkers*, but very close to the tune used to 'carry' a popular traditional song in Donegal called *Loch Fakanside*. Belle's way of the text, as might be expected, is less rigid in form than the many printed versions.

Busk, Busk, Bonnie Lassie (Bonny Glenshee)

Belle learned this distinctive parting song from her daughter Cathie's mother-in-law, the late Charlotte Higgins, 'a grand old woman for songs'. A much longer, more 'literary' version, minus chorus, is printed under the title of *Oh No No* in Gavin Greig's 'Folk Song of the North East'. The song has become very popular with revival singers, usually sung at 'funeral pace'. Belle observes it should be sung 'wae a wee lilt'.

Late Last Night

This ballad is more widely known as 'The Nobleman's Wedding' and many versions are scattered throughout the British Isles. It has been printed widely in broadsheet form. It is allegedly the basis of the London street song *All Around My Hat I Will Wear the Green Willow*. An examination of the various texts makes this suggestion credible. Belle learned the song from Ruby Kelby of Banff whose mother, the late 'Teeny' McKenzie, had an extensive repertoire.

The Twa Brothers (Child 49)

This ancient story of fratricide is widespread internationally. It is particularly popular with Scots travelling people, who have provided some of the best oral versions. The plot varies; sometimes the killing is deliberate, triggered off by a quarrel over land, or a girl. In Belle's version the killing is accidental and the dying boy assists his brother by framing an alibi. The unusual conclusion of blaming the step-mother for the event has strong echoes of the common 'mother-curse motif' emphasised in such ballads as *Clyde Waters* (Child 216). Belle's text is very close, including the vindictive mother, to Child's 'C' text from the MS of William Motherwell. Belle learned this superb version of the ballad from her brother Donald McGregor. For Belle this ballad has a 'special meaning'. It was 'one of her father's favourite songs'. 'It always appealed to me...I only had two brothers who lived out of a whole family of nine...two sisters and four brothers died before I was born....'

Leezie Lindsay (Child 226)

This ballad has appeared in fragmented form in just about every 'standard' collection of Scots song and been equally subject to stilted and standard drawing-room treatment. Belle's lively version is musically very akin to the air collected by Robert Burns for the 'Scots Musical Museum', 1796. Indeed, the opening verse, used commonly as a chorus in 'standard' literary versions, was collected by Burns and sent to the 'Museum' along with the tune. The rest of the verses are close to some appearing in Child's 'B' text from the Kinloch MSS. Variants upon the basic Lizzie Lindsay story, which in turn has similarities with *Glasgow Peggy* (Child 228), are to be found in such lengthy narratives as 'The Blaeberry Courtship' and 'Orange and Blue'. A version of the former appears in Ord, 'Bothy Songs and Ballads', and of the latter in Greig, 'Folk Song of the North-East'. Good oral versions are extant.
G McIntyre



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