

Songs from the Island of Whalsay, Shetland

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Whenever mention is made of music in the Shetland Isles then it is usually the fiddle-playing tradition that springs immediately to mind and indeed around three-quarters of the musical items from Shetland which one can currently find listed and available for listening on the *Tobar an Dualchais* website consists of fiddle tunes or information on fiddle playing. Furthermore, when I first began exploring the fiddle music traditions in our most northerly isles I was given the impression that Shetlanders 'Dinna sing that much'. But I was proved wrong by the end of my first day of visiting musicians in 'Da Boanie Isle', Whalsay - an island barely 4 miles long and 2 miles wide. There I discovered that Andrew Poleson, reputedly one of the finest fiddle players in the island, not only knew and played over a hundred 'dancing springs', as he usually called them, but also that he could sing the words associated with a number of them and moreover knew a surprising number of old ballads.

Later the same day I called on his neighbour Willie Williamson - a retired merchant seaman. Willie no longer played the fiddle but sang for me almost non-stop. The first song, 'McCafferie', he had learned from a Welsh stoker who used to sing it while shovelling coal on a tramp steamer sailing from Tyneside. The next he learned from a Scot in Singapore while working on a ship of the Blue Funnel Line. Then came a fragment of the ballad of the Scots-American privateer John Paul Jones and an exploit in 1778, when in his ship the *Ranger* Jones was in the Irish Sea harassing British shipping. After that Willie sang nine verses of 'Kitty from the Coast of Spain' - a song of an absent lover who writes a letter to his girl during the Spanish campaign in the war against Napoleon. The texts of a couple of dancing 'springs' were then followed by the archetypal Irish rebel song 'Kevin Barrie', after that, 10 verses of the ballad he called 'The Marigold' and lastly a fragment of Child Ballad

no. 213, 'Sir James the Rose'. On subsequent visits Willie sang yet more. It is hoped that now his next of kin have willingly agreed to seeing his contributions published on *Tobar an Dualchais*, all will soon be able to enjoy his superb singing. His son Willie jnr later wrote of 'Dad's ability to make a noisy room quiet just by simply sitting in a corner, head back, eyes closed and singing 'Strathairlie'.

Sometimes my evening visits to someone's home turned into happy late-night ceilidhs as friends arrived and offered songs or joined in choruses. What was striking about all the songs and ballads was how they powerfully resonated with the life experiences of the islanders themselves no matter what their provenance. The fathers and uncles of the men who sang for me were often away at sea for months, even years, while their wives and girl-friends wondered if and when next they would see them safely back home again. The uncertainty of fate was equally true of the men who went off for shorter periods to the fishing grounds in small craft to cope with the vagaries of the tidal races of the local waters.

Many of the ballads stemmed from the pens of broadsheet hacks and in this respect the period of the Napoleonic wars was a very productive period of balladeering. One ballad - known as 'The Marigold' in Whalsay - has a long history stretching back to a report of an exploit of the warship *Mary Rose* under the command of Captain John Kempthorne, when in 1669 he fought off an attack by seven Algerian pirate ships. By the 18th century, names had changed and 'Captain Mansfield's Fight with the Turkes at sea' had appeared on broadsheets but the story was the same. Willie Williamson's version¹ is a particularly fine one since, unlike the broadsheet text, his ten verses fit his tune with so euphoniously.

It is interesting to compare other early broadsheet texts with the versions recorded from singers in Whalsay over a century and a half later. Whalsay versions frequently contain small differences that make them so much more singable. Take for example the broadside ballad 'Lady Franklin's Lament', which tells of the fateful expedition in 1845 when her husband Sir John Franklin set off to search out and chart a passage through Arctic waters north of Canada. A nineteenth-century broadsheet printed by Harkness of Preston contains these rather clumsy lines:

At Baffin's Bay where the whale-fish blows
The fate of Franklin nobody knows
Which causes many a wife and child to mourn
In grievous sorrow for their return

For since that time seven years are past
And many a keen and bitter blast
Blows o'er the grave where the poor seamen fell
Whose dreadful sufferings no tongue can tell.²

Willie Williamson's corresponding verses run thus:

In Baffin's Bay where the whale-fish blow
The fate of Franklin no man knows
He left his home like many more
He left his home to return no more.

Now seven long years have gone and past;
Seven long years of the biting blast
Have swept o'er the graves where those heroes fell
Their dreadful suffering no man can tell.³

In Willie's version a Captain Flett is mentioned; it is a common surname around Kirkwall in Orkney, where Franklin's two ships made their last call to pick up provisions and possibly more crew before sailing on to the north-west. It's possible that Shetlanders were among the crews of Franklin's two ships *Erebus* and *Terror*, but in any case numerous forbears of the Whalsay men I met in the 1970s had served on Greenland whaling expeditions and knew well the conditions Franklin's crews could and did face.

Robert Hutchison spent most of his early life at sea, firstly as a fisherman, then as a whaler in South Georgia and later as a merchant seaman. His uncle Peter, from whom he learned many of his ballads, was also an able-seaman who experienced dismasting on his very first voyage around Cape Horn. One of Peter's ballads - a thirteen-verse 'come all ye' 'Edward Anderson' (aka 'The Flying Cloud') conveys the brutality of the piracy and slaving common around the Caribbean in the early 19th century. Robbie's rendering loses nothing of the poignancy of this tale despite his laconic and relaxed singing style:⁴

While lyin' in Valparaiso I met in with Captain Moore
Commander of The Flying Cloud sailing out for Baltimore
It was with him that I did agree on a slave voyage for to go
To the burning plains of Cuba where the sugar canes does grow

Oh we soon tossed o'er the ragin' seas and landed safe on shore
Five hundred of those poor men from the native homes we tore
We dragged them up upon our deck and tossed them down below
For eighteen inches to the man was all that we could stow.

We weighed our anchor, put to sea, our cargo was of slaves
Been better for those poor men had they been in their graves
For a plague and fever came on board swept half of them away,
So we dragged their bodies up on deck and strewed them in the sea.

Irish and American songs and sentimental Victorian and music-hall items, even Country and Western, are also part of Whalsay's song repertory, but though many of these were learned away from home there are numerous occasions for keeping them alive in the island. Events such as regatta concerts, weddings and 'foys' marking the end of the fishing season - when the local crews go around the houses on a 'spree' are all good excuses for singing. The tradition of having a separate 'Cooks' house' during a wedding - where older men who no longer wished to dance met in an old croft house to spend the most of the day and evening cutting up and stewing the meat before it was carried up the Haa for the other guests - was still active in the 1970s and it was there that songs and tales were also shared long into the night.

As for the womenfolk - they also have their own repertory of rhymes, riddles, dancing tunes, dandling songs and lullabies and a number of songs which were learned when they joined the teams of Scots gutters and packers who followed the herring boats north during the fishing season. Grace Anderson, whose seventeen contributions are already featured on the *Tobar an Dualchais* website, has some favourites she learned from the gutters with whom she worked. 'Aberlady Bay', for instance, was one:⁵

The blue Forth lies before us lads, the wind blows fair and free
The boat rides ower the crested wave, as if at hame wid be
And noo the moon ower Gullane Head, it lights up the bank and brae
And the rising san' like a golden band round Aberlady Bay.

Then a cheer for the bonnie, bonnie boat
That rides ower the calm and the storm sae weel
It's a cheer for the lads that catches the fish
And the lass wha carries the creel.

Cocanny [Cockenzie] wives wi' mutes fine and goons o' wincey fine
Cocanny maids wi' rosy cheeks like ruby wine
They'll meet us at the pier my lads, for weel they ken the day
When the boat will ride ower the dancing tide to Aberlady Bay.

Then a cheer for the bonnie, bonnie boat,
That rides ower the calm and the storm sae weel
It's a cheer the lads that catches the fish
And the lass that carries the creel.

'The Bonnie Fisherlass' is another with a particular meaning for the wives and girlfriends of the fishermen. The full version of the song tells of a stranger's conversation with a young lass whom he sees collecting bait along the shore. Grace's version uses the refrain to frame just those lines that I think have most meaning for her.⁶

For her rosie cheeks and her yellow hair, for an empress she might pass
And the creel she trudges daily does my bonnie fisher lass.

'My father's on the ocean, a-toiling in his boat
To earn an honest livelihood though oft-times he's afloat

And if a storm arises I'm down upon the pier
And stand and watch them dearly for his boat to appear.

For if he should find a watery grave and thus be from us cast
I'd wander broken hearted.' says the bonnie fisher lass.

For her rosie cheeks ...etc..

The 205 recordings of ballads, songs, rhymes and riddles which I made in this small island comprise a rich heritage of oral tradition - a vivid example of the power of music to give expression to the hopes, fears and joys of this small community. Many of these recordings still need to find their way into *Tobar an Dualchais* once the important work of full cataloguing is complete. However, work is simultaneously in progress to build a smaller, themed website, complementary to *Tobar an Dualchais*, where Whalsay's song heritage can be further explored and in more detail. Younger islanders themselves are already finding pleasure in contributing further information on the singers (often their own grandparents), checking texts, commenting on the songs and providing old photographs.

Notes:

¹ SA1971.214.5 (still to be added to the website).

² Roy Palmer, *The Oxford Book of Sea Songs* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 230.

³ SA1972.198.3 (still to be added to the website).

⁴ SA1974.011.13 and SA1974.012.1 (still to be added to the website).

⁵ Track 100419.

⁶ Track 100420.