

The Skranky Black Farmer

The Skranky Black Farmer. Skranky – scrawny, cranky, scraggy, mean, lean-shanked. Just the word gives us a glimpse of the black haired farmer of Earlsfield, the harsh master to whom ploughmen, herdsman and the orra loon (who did a bit o' a' thing) were in thrall. The farmer picked his servants at the feeing fairs held at Whitsun and Martinmas. The biggest fair in Aberdeenshire, Porter Fair, was in Turriff. Once an agreement had been made the servant would accept a shilling as arles, remove the plaited straw from his button-hole show he was taken and make his way home with the farmer. He would be chaumered or bothied (a chaumer was a room above the stables, a bothy a separate outhouse more likely to be found in the larger farm steadings) and subjected to the farmer's orders for the next six months. The 19th century had seen marked changes for workers on the land in the North East. The introduction of the more efficient two horse swing plough in place of the clumsy plough requiring 10-12 oxen, the loss of the old run-rig system, enlargement of farms, crop rotation, improved transport and trade meant that the old communal atmosphere had become one of commercialisation and created a gulf between the farmer and the army of landless labourers who now provided his work-force. The new centrality of the horse in the work of the farm was reflected in the hierarchy of servants topped by the ploughmen who, after a ritual initiation into the Horseman's Word, regarded almost as a trade union albeit with cultish overtones, knew what to murmur to have the animals do their bidding.

Up at 5 or 6, putting in a 10 hour day, maybe 14 at harvest-time, the farm-servant's working life was that of strictest toil, unrelieved by home comforts. Food was 'jist as it grew on the farm. Ye got yer brose in the morning ... then ye had neeps, neep-brose, kale and kale-brose, sowens ... I've seen them plesterin the wall wi kale.'¹ Occasionally this was augmented by food bought by the servant or poached from the farm – the odd chicken, fish or hen: 'And they (the farm-servants) would cover it (the hen) with clay and shove it in amongst the ashes and then when it was cooked long enough they would break open the clay and the feathers came along with it ... sometimes they shoved the hen into a pot feathers and all together and boiled it and then they took off the feathers and they took the hen out of the pot. Everything was to ... hide the feathers'.²

The evenings belonged to the servants themselves. The bothy or chaumer 'acted as a sort of folk-song incubator in Victorian and Edwardian Scotland, and the lads naturally sang everything, from classic ballads to rhymes thought up while hoeing neeps or whistling at the plough'³ The bothy ballads, sometimes called cornkisters, reflecting the habit of dunting tacketty boots on the cornkists to the rhythm of the tune, are couthy, of their time and place, and closely describe the lives of the farm servants, detailing daily tasks, grumpy farmers, the monotonous food, horsemanship, ploughing matches, hiring fairs, courting. This was in marked contrast to the poetic flights of many of the muckle or big ballads, also a feature of the north-east repertoire, whose foundations lay in the realms of history, romance and the supernatural.

The north-east of Scotland has long been notable for the wealth of its song tradition. During the early 19th century collecting became something of a vogue among the Scottish literati such as Sir Walter Scott. Many of the ballads in his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802) were, in fact, from the north-east and just under a third of the

corpus of *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882-98), published by the renowned American, Francis J Child, was from Aberdeenshire. However, the most renowned collectors of north-east songs Gavin Greig (1856-1914), headteacher of Whitehill School and his collaborator the Rev James B Duncan (1848-1917) were from the area. Between them they transcribed over 3500 song texts and 3100 melodies from some 480 contributors during the early years of the 20th century.

The authenticity of song collections purporting to be from the oral tradition has often proved a source of controversy – songs have been ‘improved’, standardised, embellished, romanticised – even sometimes forged. And many early collections have been seen as filling a literary rather than musical niche. Greig and Duncan aimed to be true to the contributors: ‘We go to the original sources, taking down the songs and ballads – words and tunes from the lips of people who still sing them; and recording everything with scrupulous fidelity. Our starting point is this: minstrelsy is sung and we recognise nothing as a ballad or song – in the true and complete sense – that is not sung.’⁴ Contrary to the practice of creating one song from several, as Scott and others are reckoned to have done, each variant of text and melody is given.

The motivation of Greig and Duncan was, like many over the previous centuries, to garner the last notes of ‘a vanishing minstrelsy’. The minstrelsy was still there, though, in the 1950s when the next major collecting expeditions were undertaken. The School of Scottish Studies was founded to record and archive the oral and cultural traditions of Scotland. Over the years songs, tales, music, traditions, oral histories have been gathered and preserved on over 9000 audiotapes. Bothy ballads (along with muckle sangs) are part of the collections providing a lasting account of the farm workers’ lives and heritage in their own words, direct and unadorned. As the songs are sung and re-sung, David Blyth’s presentation here of the variants of *The Scranky Black Farmer* that emerged through the folk revival becomes a fascinating study of contemporary representations of traditional Scots song.

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¹ Willie Mathieson, Ellon, recorded by Hamish Henderson, School of Scottish Studies Archives (SA1952.03/Tocher 17)

² Dr J Hunter, Turriff, recorded by Hamish Henderson, School of Scottish Studies Archives (SA1952.09)

³ Hamish Henderson ‘The Ballad, the Folk and the Oral Tradition, in E J Cowan (ed), *The People’s Past* (Edinburgh 1991).

⁴ Gavin Greig *The Traditional Minstrelsy of the North East of Scotland*, 1908 in Stephen Miller (ed), *Gavin Greig: ‘The Subject of Folksong’* (Isle of Man, 2000)