

BORNE ON THE CARRYING STREAM

THE LEGACY OF
HAMISH HENDERSON

edited by
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The Freedom Come-All-ye

Rock the wind in the clear days down
Blaws the clouds hee-ster-goudie o'er the bay,
But there's mair nor a rock wind blawin'
Through the great glen o' the Wadd the day,
It's a thocht that wad gae oor rottans
— A' they rogues that gang galloo, fresh and gay—
Tak the road, and seek the loanies
For their ill ploys, tae spot and play.
Nae mair will the bonnie callans
March tae war, when oor brassab crouselly
Nor wee weans frae pit-kind or clackan
Nae mair the ships sailin' dauntin' P... ..

HAMISH HENDERSON:
A SINGER'S PERSPECTIVE

Geordie McIntyre

In this essay I will attempt to highlight Hamish's work in what was, for me, his central or core activity as a song hunter gatherer, a disseminator of these songs and, not least, a songsmith and a skilful singer in his own right.

'Living Ghosts' by Brendan Kennelly¹ captures so much of the spirit, the magic and the power of song:

Richard Broderick celebrates
This winter's first and only fall of snow
With a midnight rendering
Of *The Bonny Bunch of Roses O*

And Paddy Dineen is rising
With *On Top of the Old Stone Wall*
His closed eyes respect the song.
His mind's a festival.

An now *Romona* lights the lips
Of swaying Davy Shea.
In a world of possibilities
This is the only way.

His face a summer morning
When the sun decides to smile
Tom Kean touches enchantment
With *Charming Carrig Isle*.

I've seen men in their innocence
 Untroubled by right and wrong.
 I close my eyes and see them
 Becoming song.

All the songs are living ghosts
 And long for a living voice.
 O may another fall of snow
 Bid Broderick rejoice!

Hamish was such a living voice. He spent a lifetime, by word and deed, extolling the virtues of this form of self expression and actively encouraged it in others. He spoke and wrote eloquently of the vital oral core or heartbeat of what is, in essence, a democratic muse which, at its best, is populist, non-elitist and inclusive. At one point, he described himself as 'a paid up member of the oral tradition'.² However, he fully acknowledged a parallel printed tradition reflected in the plethora of chapbooks, broadsheets and books which circulated widely, in Scotland and beyond, from the nineteenth century onwards. He wrote: 'The evidence of a reverence for the written word co-existing with a strong and resilient oral tradition is abundant in our history.'³

He appreciated the fruitful co-existence and inter-action(s) which occurred but nonetheless was also sympathetic to the views of Margaret Laidlaw, mother of James Hogg (*The Ettrick Shepherd*) when Walter Scott presented her with her ballads in print in his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. In her, much quoted, reproach to Scott she said: 'There was nane o' my sangs prentit till ye printed them yersel and they have lost their charm a' thegither.'

For charm read glamourie or enchantment. Hamish spoke of the 'unnatural captivity of print' and he released these 'prisoners' by the simplest of methods, namely singing them! This may seem obvious today but back in 1951 (a date of significance I will return to) it was much less so. By the late 1940s and early 1950s much of the traditional song repertoire was 'underground'.⁴ Hamish, along with such folk song revival luminaries as A L Lloyd and Ewan MacColl in England, helped to bring those songs into the light. Hamish's contribution, however, was first nurtured in his early years.

Hamish was an only son of a one-parent family. His mother Janet exercised a profound and lasting influence. This was a situation in which Hamish developed a lifelong identification with the suffering of others—an empathy and sympathy with the underdog and the marginalised; this was later reflected in his anti-establishment stances. Hamish, like Robbie Burns and James Hogg before him, was exposed

to his mother's singing from the very cradle and he had a receptive ear. He described his mother as 'a fine singer with a big repertoire in Scots, Gaelic and French'. 'Belt wi' Colours Three' was one of this mother's songs, a 'sombre elegiac love lament', to quote Hamish, which 'could scarcely be faulted for tragic eloquence':

The firsten thing ma laddie gied tae me.
It was a cap weel lined wi lead.
And the langer that I wore it
The heavier grew on ma head
The heavier grew on ma head.

The neisten thing oh ma laddie gied tae me,
It was a mantle wi sorrow lined.
I will wear that black mantle
Till one to borrow I find, I find,
Till one to borrow I find.

The thirdeen thing oh ma laddie gied tae me,
It was a belt wi colours three.
The first shame, the next sorrow
And last of all sad misery,
And last of all sad misery.

Now I maun climb as high a tree yet,
And herry a far far richer nest
And come down without falling.
And mairry the lad that I loe best,
And mairry the lad that I loe best.

But why should ye now climb a tree, may?
Or pu the cherries ere they be ripe?
For if the gairdner yince does see you,
He'll throw you owre yon garden dyke,
He'll throw you owre yon garden dyke.

Then up she rose and gaed on slowly,
And stately stepped owre yon lea;
And by the samen, it is weel kennen,
That mourners crave nae company,
That mourners crave nae company.

This period was surely Hamish's seed-time and, at the age of eight, he moved to Somerset. His mother died in England four years later. For

the following seventeen years Hamish was an exile, either living in England or serving overseas. This turbulent period served to sharpen his Scottish identity: 'Nobody on earth felt more Scottish than I did at Cambridge'.⁵ At the same time, his political and philosophic perspectives were firmly socialist and internationalist.

While still a student at Cambridge, immediately prior to the war, he assisted a Quaker organisation in helping Jews escape from Nazi Germany. 'The Peat Bog Soldiers' ('Die Moorsodaten') is a magnificent song which was written in 1933 in Börgermoor Concentration Camp in Emsland, North Germany. It is not difficult to see why its message of hope and ultimate triumph over oppression and injustice was so admired by Hamish (to be echoed later in some of his own compositions such as 'The Flyting o' Life and Daith', where life triumphs in a striking sexual metaphor in its last verse):

Far and wide as the eye can wander,
Heath and bog are ev'rywhere.
Not a bird sings out to cheer us,
Oaks are standing, gaunt and bare.

We are the peat-bog soldiers,
We're marching with our spades
To the bog. (repeat)

Up and down the guards are pacing,
No one, no one can go through;
Flight would mean a sure death facing,
Guns and barbed wire greet our view.

But for us there is no complaining,
Winter will in time be past;
One day we shall cry out rejoicing:
'Homeland dear, you're mine at last!'

Then will the peat-bog soldiers
March no more, with their spades
To the bog.

During the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) this was a favourite marching song of the International Brigades. Hamish, knowing of my interest in this conflict (a rehearsal for World War Two), gave me, in 1962, a photostat of his 'Canciones de les Brigadas Internacionales', published in 1938. This generosity was typical of him. Hamish also encouraged me in song writing—an experience shared by many!

Much later, in 1986, I wrote 'Another Valley', inspired by the reminiscences of a Scots Brigadier, the late Eddie Brown. This is the last verse:

The sun breaks o'er the Golden City,
 Mourning shrouds soon disappear,
 A flower blooms from a darkened corner,
 A laverock rises in the air,
 For iron hearts and fists of steel,
 Cannot smoor the vibrant voice,
 That sings for peace and cries for justice
 Leaving us to make a choice.⁶

Hamish was neither just an antiquarian nor a mere preservationist but always actively encouraged and inspired new song writing. Back in 1973 I asked him, in an extensive interview, whether the explosion in new song writing was a major indicator of the evident success of the folk song revival. His answer was unequivocal:

Absolutely. The revival will sink or swim by its capacity to throw up new and constantly fresh thinkers and writers who will be open and free to take and adapt anything. The health of the whole set up depends on the musician's freedom of movement.⁷

Ewan MacColl wrote, in relation to Hamish's own songwriting:

I think as a songwriter he made his greatest contribution. His output of songs is comparatively small but each song he has written is a jewel. He writes in the classic Scots tongue of Dunbar and Henryson with never a hint of the couthie accents of the Kailyard. They are models of their kind and an inspiration to all Scots singers and songwriters.⁸

Hamish was also a fine singer and did more than justice to songs like 'Lang Johnny More', 'Tail Toddle', 'The Spanish Lady' and the classic bothy song, 'Rhynie'—to name but a few. He also made a good job of his own songs!

During his war service, songs loomed large—at all points.⁹ In his work for military intelligence as an interrogator he would often ask the prisoners, be they German or Italian, if they knew any songs. And better still, whether they could sing them! Such was his compassion, humanity and vision he would not let himself be 'disfigured by the villainy of hatred' and this is reflected in his superb *Elegies for the Dead*

in *Cyrenica* published in 1948¹⁰ in which he honoured 'the dead, the innocent' of either side.

Hamish collected 'The D-Day Dodgers',¹¹ his classic, authentic, squaddy song during the Italian campaign. He probably wrote at least one verse of the song himself but, to my knowledge, never owned up to it.

We're the D-Day Dodgers, out in Italy –
 Always on the vino, always on the spree,
 8th Army scroungers and their tanks
 We live in Rome – among the Yanks.
 We are the D-Day Dodgers, way out in Italy.

We landed in Salerno, a holiday with pay;
 The Jerries brought the bands out to greet us on the way,
 Showed us the sights and gave us tea.
 We all sang songs the beer was free,
 To welcome the D-Day Dodgers, to sunny Italy.
 Naples and Cassino were taken in our stride,
 We didn't go to fight there – we just went for the ride.
 Anzio and Sangro were just names,
 We only went to look for dames –
 The artful D-Day Dodgers, way out in Italy.

On the way to Florence we had a lovely time,
 We ran a bus to Rimini right through the Gothic Line.
 Soon to Bologna we will go
 And after that we'll cross the Po.
 We'll still be D-Day Dodging, way out in Italy.

Once we heard a rumour that we were going home,
 Back to dear old Blighty – never more to roam.
 Then someone said: 'In France you'll fight!'
 We said: 'No fear – we'll just sit tight!'
 (The windy D-Day Dodgers, way out in Italy).

Dear Lady Astor, you think you know a lot,
 Standing on the platform and talking tommy-rot
 You, England's sweetheart and its pride,
 We think your mouth's too bleedin wide,
 That's from your D-Day Dodgers – in far off Italy.

Look around the mountains, in the mud and rain –
 You'll find the scattered crosses –
 there's some which have no name.
 Heartbreak and toil and suffering gone,
 The boys beneath them slumber on.
 Those are the D-Day Dodgers who'll stay in Italy.

In 1949, to be precise, Hamish 'saw a tape recorder for the first time', at a party given by the Olivetti family in Italy. In an interview for *Scotland on Sunday* magazine he called it 'a real turning point in my life'. In short, he recognised its capacity and potential as an invaluable collecting tool, and this proved to be the case. Subsequent recordings in the north-east of Scotland with Alan Lomax¹² in 1951 played a major part in the creation of the School of Scottish Studies. At this point the school existed on paper only. Hamish noted: 'The tapes were the very origin of the school, boy they really did shake them.' These recordings, in fact, helped convince the powers-that-be in the University of the wealth of material (in Gaelic and in English/Scots) yet to be tapped. Again, Hamish stressed the (nowadays obvious) value in having 'the living voice—the sounds you need.'

1951 was, in fact, a very significant year. It saw the first of the four consecutive People's Festival ceilidhs in Edinburgh, organised by Hamish and Martin Milligan, et al. This is well documented¹³ and indeed was recorded.¹⁴ The ceilidh had three elements: north-east Scottish song, Gaelic song and piping. It exposed an urban audience to a 'masterly group of authentic traditional singers and musicians from rural Scotland' and included Flora MacNeill of Barra, John Strachan of Fyvie, Jimmy McBeath of Portsoy, Jessie Murry of Buckie and the virtuoso piping of John Burgess of Easter Ross. The event was a revelation, and its importance can hardly be overstated. The audiences were deeply impressed by the artistry and importantly they included the poet and songwriter Morris Blythman (aka Thurso Berwick) as well as Norman and Janey Buchan. They became leading movers and shakers in what was to become the Scottish folk song revival—spearheaded by Hamish.

Norman Buchan wrote later:

Looking back that evening was devastatingly new to me... it shouldn't have been. Although I grew up in the Orkney Islands, my folk came from the North-East coast. The Revival didn't really start that night at the ceilidh. Things were going on, it's just that we did not know about it.

Here is a song from that evening, 'Skippin' Barfit Through the Heather' sung by the Buckie fishwife, Jessie Murray:

As I was walkin' doon yon hill
 It was in a summer evenin',
 It was there I spied a bonny lass
 Skippin' barfit through the heather.

Oh but she was neatly dressed,
 She neither needed hat nor feather;
 She was the queen among them a',
 Skippin' barfit through the heather.

'Will ye come wi' me, my bonny lass,
 Will ye come wi' me and leave the heather?
 It's silks an' satins ye will wear
 If ye come wi' me and leave the heather.'

She wore a goon o' the bonnie blue,
 Her petticoats were a pheasant colour,
 And in between the stripes were seen
 Shinin' bells o' bloomin' heather.

'Oh young man your offer's good,
 But sae weel I ken ye will deceive me:
 But gin ye tak my hert awa'
 Better if I had never seen ye.'

Oh but she was neatly dressed,
 She neither needed hat nor feather;
 She was the Queen among them a',
 Skippin' barfit through the heather.

The song 'Rivonia' (to the tune of 'Viva la Quince Brigada') was written after the Rivonia trial of 1964. It was sent to South African freedom-fighters and also reached Nelson Mandela while incarcerated in Robben Island. It was even in the Tanzanian hit parade at one point! On his release, Nelson Mandela came to Glasgow in October 1993 to receive, in person, the freedom of the city. Nelson thanked Hamish for the song, and on that momentous day in George Square they danced

together on stage! Indeed, Ian Davison wrote an excellent song as a result.¹⁵

They have sentenced the men of Rivonia
 Rumbala rumbala rumba la
 The comrades of Nelson Mandela
 Rumbala rumbala rumba la
 He is buried alive on an island
 Free Mandela Free Mandela
 He is buried alive on an island
 Free Mandela Free Mandela

Verwoerd feared the mind of Mandela
 Rumbala rumbala rumba la
 He was stifling the voice of Mandela
 Rumbala rumbala rumba la
 Free Mbeki, Goldberg, Sisulu
 Free Mandela Free Mandela
 Free Mbeki, Goldberg, Sisulu
 Free Mandela Free Mandela

The crime of the men of Rivonia
 Rumbala rumbala rumba la
 Was to organise farmer and miner
 Rumbala rumbala rumba la
 Against baaskap and sjambok and keerie
 Free Mandela Free Mandela
 Against baaskap and sjambok and keerie
 Free Mandela Free Mandela

Set free the men of Rivonia
 Rumbala rumbala rumba la
 Break down the walls of their prison
 Rumbala rumbala rumba la
 Freedom and justice Uhuru
 Free Mandela Free Mandela
 Freedom and justice Uhuru
 Free Mandela Free Mandela

Power to the heirs of Luthuli
 Rumbala rumbala rumba la
 The comrades of Nelson Mandela
 Rumbala rumbala rumba la
 Spear of the Nation unbroken
 Free Mandela Free Mandela
Amandla Umkhonto we Sizwe
 Free Mandela Free Mandela

To quote Timothy Neat: 'Hamish believed that music and song can with almost magical force connect past and present: like water they find their level and make their way.'¹⁶

Hamish strove to make Scotland and the wider world a better place, and he believed our democratic muse contributed (and contributes) mightily to this. A song that exemplifies his spirit (he would ask Alison and I to sing it on many occasions in his final months and weeks) is Ewan MacColl's 'Joy of Living'. This is the last verse:

Take me to some high place
 Of heather, rock and ling
 Scatter my dust and ashes
 Feed me to the wind
 So that I may be
 Part of all you see
 The air you are breathing
 I'll be part of the curlew's cry
 And the soaring hawk
 The blue milkwort
 And the sundew hung with diamonds
 I'll be riding the gentle wind
 That blows through your hair
 Reminding you, how we shared
 In the joy of living.

References:

- 1 Brendan Kennelly, *Familiar Strangers: New and Selected Poems (1960-2004)* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2004), p. 463.
- 2 Timothy Neat, *Hamish Henderson: A Biography: Vol. 1, The Making of the Poet (1919-1953)* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2007); *Vol. 2, Poetry Becomes People (1952-2002)* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2009).
- 3 Hamish Henderson, 'The Oral Tradition', in Paul H Scott (ed.) *Scotland: A Concise Cultural History* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1993).
- 4 Hamish Henderson, 'The Underground of Song' in *The Scots Magazine* (February 1963), reprinted in Hamish Henderson, *Alias MacAlias*, edited by Alec Finlay (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1992), pp. 31-36.
- 5 Geordie McIntyre, from 'Resurgimento. Interview with Hamish Henderson' in the special Festival issue of *New Edinburgh Review* (August 1973). Reprinted verbatim in the programme for the fifth Carrying Stream Festival (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Folk Club, November 2006).
- 6 Geordie McIntyre, *Inveroran: Songs by Geordie McIntyre* (St Ervan, Wadebridge, Cornwall: Lyngham House, 2005).
- 7 'Resurgimento'
- 8 *Tocher*, no. 43 (1991), p. 14.
- 9 Neat (2007) Roughly thirty percent of this weighty volume is, rightly, devoted to the war period.
- 10 Hamish Henderson: *Collected Poems and Songs*, edited by Raymond Ross (Edinburgh: Curly Snake Publishing, 2000)—which includes the *Elegies*, first published in 1948.
- 11 *Ibid*, p. 94.
- 12 Neat (2007); and Ailie Munro, *The Democratic Muse: Folk Song Revival in Scotland* (Aberdeen: Scottish Cultural Press, 1996).
- 13 See Munro, *Ibid*.
- 14 Recorded by Alan Lomax, now on a CD from Rounder Records, Cambridge Mass. This is superbly remastered digitally and edited by Ewan McVicar. Thirty-five memorable tracks, including some from Hamish.
- 15 'Mandela Danced' from the CD *The Best of Ian Davison*, a double CD produced by Clyde Tracks.
- 16 Neat (2007), p. 276.
- 17 *The Essential Ewan McColl Songbook* (New York: Oak Publications, 2001).