

Challenge and Response

Elizabeth Stewart and the Fetterangus Stewarts

Within the Scottish Folk Song Revival there is hardly an event or development which does not involve the influence, direct and indirect of Hamish Henderson. The recent publication of *Up Yon Wide and Lonely Glen: Travellers' Songs, Stories and Tunes of the Fetterangus Stewarts told by Elizabeth Stewart* is such a case in point on several fronts. The Stewarts' ancestral roots are deep and honoured and when Hamish Henderson first visited Geordie Stewart of Huntly looking for old songs he was directed to Fetterangus to visit Geordie's sisters Lucy and Jean, and his brother Ned saying "That they were weel- kent for their music and songs an the ballads that he wis lookin for." Elizabeth recalls that "This wis about 1955 when I wis jist a quinie aboot sixteen years aul. It's true the family were kent for their music aaready but little did we realize that this tall, slim and quite guid- lookin stranger wis tae tak oor name beyond Aiberdeenshire an so mak it and us weel-kent internationally. This wis tae change oor musical lives forever." Today Elizabeth Stewart is an outstanding practioner of the traditional arts. An internationally recognized singer, storyteller, composer, pianist and song writer of remarkable ability who has performed all over the UK and made several tours in America. She is the principal inheritor and advocate of her family the Fetterangus Stewarts, the Northeast branch of the extended Stewart family of Travellers in the province of Buchan, the heartland of traditional balladry in Lowland Scotland. This legendary family has had immense musical influence and been visited by musicians, singers, folklorists and journalists over fifty years.

As editor and compiler of *Up Yon Wide and Lonely Glen* I never anticipated the challenge of editing and compiling such a book or the response needed to bring this book into being and I have to remember the beginnings and background for such an undertaking. When I visited Elizabeth in 1998 at her home in Mintlaw she had quite recently returned from her final singing trip to the USA. Oblivious that Elizabeth had come home determined that the songs, tales and lore, life stories and music of her family should be put into a book so "That the way of life and Traveller traditions should not be forgotten." I was unaware of this resolution until she asked if I would help her to do such a book. I was unprepared for this, however on another visit and in listening to Elizabeth's stories of her legendary and famous great – grandfather Crichton Donald and his sons who were all military pipers, and about her grandparents Aul Betty and Aul Jimmsy, of her mother Jean Stewart and aunt Lucy (who I had met) I felt drawn to do so and agreed to undertake it. Why? Like many other people, I had first visited Lucy in the early 1970s (which was when I also first met Elizabeth). I was encouraged to do so by Hamish Henderson, my mentor and valued friend, for as a young singer I was seeking to find out more about Scots songs and ballads, and I was eager to learn from older singers. Hamish had invited me to visit the School of Scottish Studies where initially he gave me a compilation tape of source singers to listen to and which had been prepared as a teaching resource for students. A track of a particular woman singer shone out. I asked if there were any more recordings of her and this prompted him to search in the basement of 27 St George's Place returning with a number of tapes solely of Lucy Stewart. Giving over his study to me as my base for listening I was to spend many hours there over several visits. In hearing these reel to reel tapes of Lucy I was enthralled and inspired by her direct story-telling style and her strong voice which was at times sweet, haunting and stark. I was overwhelmed by the treasury of songs with their beautiful and rare melodies. They told of legendary and historical happenings, love songs with much pain and disappointment, of longings and struggles, of defiance and humour - both daft and clever. On these visits, I stayed with Hamish and his charming wife Kätzel, receiving a warm welcome and sleeping in the front room of their Melville Terrace flat. I remember a stack of vinyl records in the corner of the room, one of which was of Lucy Stewart singing 11 ballads. Learning songs and ballads from these sources, the Stewart family music already had a hold on me, and when I visited Lucy Stewart in Aberdeenshire this was an important event for me. Elizabeth's request, so many years later, offered me the prospect of deepening my understanding of traditional singing and ballad style and to learn more of the repertoire of this particular area within its context. It also, importantly, presented the opportunity for me to give something back as well as to give something into the future: to record and document cultural riches

that were under threat and to aid Elizabeth, guardian of her family's legacy, to realize her dream of a book on the Fetterangus Stewarts.

Elizabeth Stewart was born on the 13th of May, 1939, at the home of her grandma Aul Betty and grandfather Aul Jimmsy, 14 South Street (Duke St) Fetterangus. From her earliest beginnings she was surrounded by family music and song which was steeped in the Traveller and Buchan culture. At that time her grandparents' settled home was a working croft, consisting of two large cornfields at the end of Duke St and a large piece of land at the back and side of their house and barn. The land was used as a camping ground by other Travellers for the Stewarts were known for their music and were like a magnet drawing them to this area. Elizabeth's grandparents had a family of ten sons and four daughters and before finally settling in Fetterangus they had lived the traditional traveller lifestyle of wintering in Aberdeen and travelling in the summer months to well known camping grounds such as Udney, Scotstoun Moor, Hatton o Fintry, even as far as Inverurie, the area where the Battle of Harlaw took place. Once having set up camp they had to provide for themselves and Aul Betty would travel around the nearby countryside with a pack on her back whilst Aul Jimmsy would sell good quality goods, china ware, pots and pans from their carts whilst looking after the family. He would also teach the pipes from this base, however he came into his own when playing at the annual Games' competitions for piping and playing for the dancing. Their sons followed in the footsteps of their distinguished forebears becoming military pipers but other instruments were played, fiddles, accordions, whistle and drums, and as Elizabeth tells "Every one o them knew the songs and ballads especially Aul Betty." The family were proud of their ancestral lineage to the Appin Stewarts believing in the Royal Stewart linkage which made them staunch Jacobite supporters. The stories about their way of life and the strong bond with the land they travelled are embodied in the songs, music and tales which Elizabeth grew up hearing and absorbing.

Elizabeth's musical influences were from her maternal side and most importantly from her mother Jean, her aunt Lucy and her fiddle playing uncle Ned. Jean was the youngest of the family of fourteen and became a highly regarded and talented musician. She studied piano attaining twelve certificates from the London College of Music, played the accordion, was a composer and dancing teacher. She had her own family dance band at the age of sixteen and from then onwards was engaged by the BBC to play regularly as a soloist and to accompany the likes of Willie Kemp and John Mearns amongst others. Jean became a household name and with her brother Ned they formed the original Fetterangus Strathspey and Reel Society. She was also an influential teacher throughout Aberdeenshire and is still fondly remembered by the public who enjoyed her music and by ex pupils who became musicians. Her story as a Traveller lass who achieved so much as a working musician is given testament by the journalist and broadcaster Jack Webster who writes *Jean Stewart was a musical legend of my early childhood in the 1930s and beyond. When I finally caught up with her in my youth, it was mainly in her role as dance - band leader around the village halls of Buchan. Whether it was Mintlaw, Maud, New Deer or Strichen, there she would be on stage, a good looking woman with the striking features of her heritage and a ready smile that lit up her face. Then she would burst into life on her accordion and away we went, dancing in the way we used to dance in those days before Rock 'n' Roll. It was post war of scarcity but there was no scarcity of top-class dance-bands and musicians - and none better than by Jean Stewart, who lingers in the memory like a distant song.*

Lucy played an important part in Elizabeth's upbringing given that Jean was a full time musician and her children were looked after by their aunt Lucy at home. Elizabeth says " She was aye there tae put us tae school, jist tae tak care o us, plaiting oor hair an singin aa the time, as soon as we

were up, morning, noon and night, jist all day really. Some times she telt us the story o the ballad first an then sung it - and Lucy loved history so there wis these stories tae.” Acknowledged in the family as the one who knew all the songs aunt Lucy was the major inspiration although all the near family knew and sang most of the songs and ballads. *The Butcher’s Boy* for instance was always sung by Elizabeth’s mother Jean. Elizabeth absorbed a wide repertoire in early childhood. Hearing tragic murder ballads such as *The Cruel Mother* alongside *Peer Wee Jockie Clark* and children’s songs and games sung to amuse them were all part of this rich repertoire. Lucy was first recorded by Hamish Henderson in 1955 and he returned on other occasions bringing with him Peter Kennedy, Alan Lomax and then a young American Fulbright scholar named Kenneth Goldstein. All four folklorists recorded Lucy but it was Kenny Goldstein who later studied the lore and music of the family in the period of October ’58 to June 1960. One fruitful outcome of this project was his superb LP of *Lucy Stewart, Child Ballads, Volume 1 Folkways FG3519*. Kenny wrote in the introductory note to the album of the warm and generous reception he and his family received and how “ They gave everything and asked for nothing in return” and this is the spirit and legacy which Elizabeth is proud to be part of. So yet again through the guiding hand and vision of Hamish Henderson the impact of the Stewart family’s songs and ballads resounded on the emerging Scottish folksong revival. From then on people beat a path to Lucy’s door and some very well known ones at that. Ewan MacColl, Peggy Seeger and Charles Parker were working on their award winning radio documentary *Singing the Fishing* and visited her. Lucy called Elizabeth in to play for them and she played a boogied – up version of *The Hills of Bennachie*. From this *The Fisher Lassies* song was written and Elizabeth and Jane were invited to record it in Birmingham on the original radio documentary sound track.

Elizabeth’s obsession from early childhood was the piano and surprisingly it was Lucy who taught her to play *Endearing Young Charms* and *My Aul Wife an Your Aul Wife* on the piano at the age of four. From then on there was no stopping Elizabeth’s eagerness to play more and more tunes. She loved the bagpipes and the pipe tunes which her mother would play as well as favourite marches on the piano and accordion. Her mother would let her sit in on the lessons she was giving so that Elizabeth could learn too and in this way she “Picked up reading music frae her.” Such was her enthusiasm to play that she first performed in her mother’s dance band at the age of nine. This was the beginning of her apprenticeship in the family dance band when, along with her younger sister Jane, they sang and played all over the Northeast. However by the age of fourteen Elizabeth became so well known for her playing that she first broadcast in Aberdeen as a soloist. Her programme for this was the classic ‘heavy’ bagpipe marches with six or seven measures or variations. Elizabeth progressed to leading her own band(s) in various line ups throughout the following years, playing for dances, functions and weddings. She was also a member of The Fetterangus Strathspey and Reel Society and when her mother died in 1962 Elizabeth took over her role as pianist for the Society’s practices and performances. Elizabeth’s musical tastes have been, and are, highly eclectic from blues, rock and roll to classical, however her greatest and enduring passion has been for the ‘auld sangs’ and the ‘Stewarts’ way o’ it’. So much so, that in 1972 Elizabeth was invited to represent the family and their music in the USA - this was to be the first of her visits there. She also did tours in the UK singing at well established folk clubs.

In these preceding paragraphs I have given skeletal outlines of the family and the themes which I had to pursue and flesh out with Elizabeth through our field recordings and from the hand written accounts contributed by her. I revisited, but in more depth and detail, tapes held in the School of Celtic and Scottish Studies Archive - those first recorded by Hamish Henderson, Arthur Argo, Hamish with Peter Kennedy and the Kenneth Goldstein tapes made in 1959 – 60, all of which I transcribed and documented. We were given great support and encouragement by Dr Margaret Mackay then Director who was to extend this throughout the later stage of preparing the final manuscript. I contacted key people who had memories of the family like Jock Duncan and Jack Webster, and the American calligraphic artist and song enthusiast Howard Glasser who contributed his tapes and journal entries from his 1963 visit to the family. I was invited to produce Elizabeth’s double CD *Binnorrie* made in 2004 for the Elphinstone Institutes’s Travellers Project, Aberdeen University . Professor Ian Russell and Dr Tom McKean knew that we hoped to publish a book and were immensely supportive seeing it as a pre runner to our venture. Elizabeth chose to record a very

personal selection of ballads and songs including some of her own piano tunes and compositions. Importantly, this highlighted her unique singing style and distinctive piano playing. The challenges were many in what I have just described, not least the immense treasure trove of material which seemed to grow and grow as I and we delved deeper over an eight year period. However the next stage was to prepare the final manuscript for submission to a publisher. A Creative Scotland Award in 2007 enabled me to engage Jo Miller to transcribe the music of over 150 songs and ballads. Her careful hand written transcriptions were edited and turned into what is now seen on the page by Ian Abernethy which proved to be a great musical partnership over 2 years. Cal Milligan of the School of Celtic and Scottish Studies oversaw and organized the complete manuscript, transcribing and editing for the narrative as we worked on it together which was then passed on for Elizabeth to read, change and add to as we progressed. The use of the Department's facilities was made available to us over a three year period during which - on a voluntary basis - Geordie McIntyre researched and wrote the song notes and Eric Rice transcribed Elizabeth's eight piano compositions. Our final goal was reached and the manuscript was submitted to the Elphinstone Institute and University Press of Mississippi to be considered. The material had become a 400 page manuscript holding more than 150 song texts with their musical scores, song notes and bibliography, 80 photographs, a narrative which gives life stories, anecdotes, 28 traditional tales, lore and riddles set within a broad network of cultural practice.

Elizabeth Stewart's personal reminiscences are at the heart of this book. She tells of her ancestral family and of three generations of women, of their lives and musical traditions, and of their story traditions. The family narratives, traditional tales and riddles are interwoven throughout giving a fascinating portrayal of the Stewart family's repository of stories and lore. A diverse anthology of songs complement the prose ranging from Stewart versions of classic ballads to comic and music hall songs, parodies and children's rhymes. Some of these ballads and songs are now widely sung having been first brought to the wider public during the Folk Revival. Documented here we are again reminded of the Stewart source, and of their kith and kin inhabiting the same area as Gavin Greig and James Duncan, whose *Greig- Duncan Folk Song Collection* was amassed during the early years of the 20th century. At that time very few of their song informants were Travellers and so the richness of the Stewart song repertoire illustrates the family's and the Travellers' unique role in the preservation of the music and song tradition of the Northeast. Also included are Elizabeth's own music and ballad compositions bringing modernity to the anthology and adding to the kist of riches that Elizabeth grew up with. She is keen to stress, "It is not a complete collection as there are many more songs and stories, too many in fact for the book to hold." Elizabeth's wish for her family songs, stories and lore to be available highlights her unswerving conviction and belief in her inheritance. It is a tribute to her people, a Traveller family and to the Traveller way of life as known in her lifetime.

In my role as editor and compiler I was obviously aware that such a tribute was immensely important however in my endeavour to fulfil her expectations I realised I would also have to merge my own vision in order to shape the book into an artistic whole. I knew why we were doing it but who would the reading public be? what areas of interest could it contribute to? These questions, my own connections and background served to underpin many aspects of the work undertaken: researching all available archival song recordings, comparing different performances of the same song by two members of the family, pressing Elizabeth with further questions to tease out more details and give a fuller description of what she was talking about, to try and remember other verses for a half remembered song fragment - these examples and more were the procedures we engaged upon in working towards our goal.

The book is divided into four chapters, consecutively focussing on the following: the ancestral family in *Doon the Dukker*; Elizabeth's mother in *Jean Stewart's Dance Band*; her aunt in *Aunt Lucy* and Elizabeth's own life story in *Binnorrie*. Each chapter begins with a narrative drawn from the edited transcripts of Elizabeth's oral telling and handwritten accounts and ends with a short personal testament from individuals who knew or were connected with the central figure(s) featured in the chapter. The narrative is followed by a selection of ballads, songs and children's singing

rhymes with their tunes. Elizabeth's own piano compositions head and conclude the anthology in each chapter. The range and variety of these items are carefully chosen to reflect the preceding narrative, showing how or where Elizabeth first heard and learnt them, giving their context and meaningful associations. At the conclusion of chapter 4 there are Song Notes with a related Bibliography by Geordie McIntyre who gives the wider frame of reference for the song material. Recording references for each song transcription are given in the Song Notes. Appendices 1 and 2 illuminate the process undertaken when compiling the book and Appendix 3 gives examples of unedited archival material. In Appendix 1 Caroline Milligan describes the editorial decisions and methods employed when collating the narrative sections. In Appendix 2 Jo Miller writes of the song music transcriptions with observations on the singing styles. Appendix 3 gives examples of stories, riddles and song- fragments from the Kenneth and Rochelle Goldstein Archive deposited in the School of Celtic and Scottish Studies Archive. The content and format of the book is intended to be accessible to a general public as well as the specialist. A song book and tunes for the performer, singer and instrumentalist, as well as for the student of folk music studies, traditional song and balladry; for those interested in Traveller culture and traditions, Scottish studies, social and local history, and for the academic researcher who has specific lines of inquiry to follow.

Hamish Henderson championed the Scottish Travellers, this marginalised ethnic minority living on the outside of society and shown much prejudice and condemnation. It was Hamish who blazed the trail discovering the vast riches within their oral traditions and culture. It was Hamish who crossed the border in the 1950s and built bridges for a two way passage. If only he was here today how he would cheer Elizabeth's determination to celebrate her culture. Without doubt Elizabeth Stewart comes from a legendary Traveller family of pipers, musicians and singers - that from the 1920s until the early 1960s her mother Jean Stewart was a household name in the Northeast of Scotland, known for her dance bands, broadcasting and teaching - and how her aunt Lucy's ballad singing and treasury of songs made an impact on the 1950-60s Scottish Folk Revival reaching well beyond these shores. The influence of these women is still reverberating today and they in turn owed much to their mother Aul Betty, whose own story of a hardworking and resourceful Traveller shows that songs and singing enriched her life and were part of the legacy she left to the family. This book is Elizabeth Stewart's legacy for future generations – and for us all.

Alison McMorland

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Travellers' Songs, Stories and Tunes of the Fetterangus Stewarts

Elizabeth Stewart compiled and edited by Alison McMorland ISBN 978-1-61703-308-7

University Press of Mississippi in association with the Elphinstone Institute,

University of Aberdeen AB24 5UA

