

Hamish Henderson (1919-2002): Fieldworker and Collector

Alison McMorland

Kist o Riches is a tremendously exciting digital resource that takes our imaginations into other peoples' worlds: their songs and music, ballads, life stories and tales, oral and social history. The *Kist* thus represents a vast treasure trove for exploring Scotland's cultural heritage, which, like a deep-rooted tree, has many branches. Indeed, to those of us for whom this heritage is a living presence in our lives, we find it also brings the renewal of memories of tradition bearers, no longer with us, but to whom we owe so much.

Navigating these other worlds via the *Kist*, from Whithorn to Caithness, Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles, certain names remain a constant thread throughout - those of the reporters or collectors 'in the field' recording hundreds of folk. I am referring to such luminaries (amongst others) as Calum Maclean, Frances Collinson and Hamish Henderson, original field workers and members of the then newly formed School of Scottish Studies in the early 1950s. At that time, the School was constantly in need of funds for its work, and as a means to highlight their endeavours Hamish wrote a letter to the Scotsman in 1953 concerning his collecting work. The following quotation shows Hamish's hope for the wider impact of his collecting: 'It would be a great irony if your readers assumed that I did not want my recordings of Scots folksongs to be broadcast. On the contrary, I believe that the broadcasting of them would be an event of great cultural significance in Scotland.'¹ Clearly then, Hamish would have attached great importance to the *Kist* of today. Likewise, in the mid-1960s, he wrote of his long term vision: 'My hope - and it has been realised in quite a large number of cases - has been to encourage young folk to approach their cultural heritage with élan.'² He would be encouraged to know that there are, at present, approximately 34,000 tracks online, about 10% of which were collected by Hamish himself. For my part, it

is thrilling to know that these precious recordings are available to the listening world - precious because of the collector himself and also because of the men and women he recorded from all walks of life.

What makes a good collector and what is the process undertaken? Well, I am writing as someone who was already collecting when I met Hamish in the early 1970s. I had no formal folkloric education, just a passion for songs as I was born into a musical family and grew up singing. In my own quest for traditional songs with their respective historical, social and economic contexts, my natural enthusiasm was responded to favourably. For me, it was instinctive to know that a collector has to first establish a rapport and gain the trust of the source singer. I learnt that showing respect to what is dear to their hearts builds the confidence needed in our communication. Also importantly, and in hindsight, the singer within me responded to the creativity of that other person. Such interplay, with a similar dynamic, is in evidence innumerable times with Hamish when collecting, his own creativity as poet, singer, and chronicler igniting the flame within countless singers. Listening to Hamish's interviews online, we sense his empathy as he cajoles and coaxes more songs or information from the informant. His genuine interest and skill to engage with the person's process of recalling, in recreating and giving of themselves, saying what they want without restraint, shows the trust present which results in a relationship that in some cases formed long friendships.

A good example of this process can be heard in an interview Hamish conducts with the Dundee poet Mary Brooksbank,³ known locally as the 'gentle rebel' in reference to her radical politics and her speaking out against unemployment and the plight of the working classes, both as an activist, and as a poet and songwriter:

Oh dear me, the mill's gaein fest,
The puir wee shifters canna get a rest,
Shiftin bobbins, coorse and fine,
They fairly mak ye work fir yer ten and nine.⁴

In this interview she gives personal details of her parents and her early blindness. Hamish gently questions in a conversational manner

displaying local knowledge which aids the descriptions given by Mary. Any background knowledge is offered by him in a conversational manner to move things on and he is always wholly appreciative of the singer and of his or her rendition and never, but never, judgemental. I have been at the receiving end of his collecting/recording: he took me, as a young singer, under his wing to inspire and mentor me, leading to the release of my solo album in 1975 *Belt Wi Colours Three*, for which he wrote the song and biographical sleeve notes.⁵ But above all, he became a dear friend to me as he did to countless others.

Hamish was a remarkable collector and recorded in depth from a significant list of vital singers and storytellers, harvesting truly outstanding and unexpected songs, ballads and stories. The term 'collecting in the field' serves to indicate recording/collecting from people at grass roots level and is an appropriate term, for Hamish did literally often record in the outdoors. There is a famous photograph showing him sitting in open ground holding his microphone towards the seated and now legendary blind Ali Dall, Alexander Stewart (1882-1967) - a Traveller and tinsmith who worked in Caithness and Sutherland, and considered one of the greatest Gaelic storytellers ever recorded.

Song collecting from Travellers in Perthshire at the berry fields of Blair's annual berry-picking time led Hamish to describe the experience as 'like holding a tin-can under the Niagara Falls; in a single session you can hear everything from ancient Ossianic hero-tales, whose content reflects the life of the primitive hunter tribesmen, to the caustic pop-song parodies thought up by Clydeside teenagers the same afternoon.' He goes on to write of the quality of the songs and how 'they have the authentic bloom of the open air on them; they are the sort of material which can never be adequately recaptured in studio recordings'. More important still, they carry the listener to the very heart of a way of life which, although profoundly alien to most industrialised Western society, has a permanent appeal, validity and attractiveness of its own:

Field of the travellers, who
That saw you could forget so soon?
Let them seek you in my forehead,
The playground of the sands and moon.⁶

Hamish recorded and championed the Travelling community over many years. An early pinnacle of his folkloric career occurred in 1953, when he met Jeannie Robertson (1908-1975), a settled Traveller in Aberdeen whose repertoire and singing style was to bring her wider fame through commercial recordings and public performances, as it did for the Stewarts of Blairgowrie.

It is worth noting that Hamish and other field collectors were not searching for star performers, but nevertheless, in their journeys throughout Scotland many exceptional tradition bearers emerged into the limelight and proved to be influential to the burgeoning folk revival: the shy and modest Lucy Stewart of Fetterangus (1901-1982), and Willie Scott (1897-1989), Liddesdale shepherd of the Borders, to name but two. On one particular recording, we hear how Hamish persistently encourages Willie to whistle tunes and song airs as well as asking him how he learnt to play the fiddle.⁷ There is an easy exchange between the two men; it was after all Hamish who first introduced Willie to the folk scene in the early 1960s, in particular to the Dunfermline Howff Folk club. In this 1970 interview, Willie's easy confidence is evident even when not able to sing a well-known song. He was to become a towering figure within the Scottish folk scene - in fact one of the best known figures in the folk revival - and received invitations to appear at festivals from all over Britain, visiting America and Australia.⁸

Hamish Henderson is without doubt one of the outstanding and influential figures of 20th century Scotland, and this status derives in part from his determined and charismatic quest for songs. His was an epic life; his work touched countless people, activated and contributed to cultural and political change, and found its creative voice through his own poetry and songs. He was an artist alive to the times he lived in: as a soldier, international peace activist, anti-nuclear campaigner, socialist, 'father' of the Scots folk revival, champion of marginalised groups - in particular the Travelling people.⁹ The recordings on the *Kist o Riches* are a part of the legacy of Hamish Henderson, and are moreover proof of his qualities as an exemplary collector.

Notes:

¹ Letter to Scotsman, 17 February 1953, reproduced in *The Armstrong Nose: Selected Letters of Hamish Henderson*, ed. Alec Finlay (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996), pp. 62-63.

² Letter to Jimmie MacGregor, 10 February 1967, reproduced in *The Armstrong Nose*, pp. 158-159.

³ Track 58025.

⁴ For Mary's own description of how she came to write this song, and of other formative experiences in her life, see track 24693.

⁵ Alison McMorland, *Belt Wi Colours Three*, Tagent TGS125, released 1977. For notes on Alison and her singing, see Hamish Henderson, 'Scots Folksong Discography, Part 4', *Tocher* 30 (Edinburgh, School of Scottish Studies, 1979), pp. 405-406, reproduced in Hamish Henderson, *Alias MacAlias: Writings on Songs, Folk and Literature*, ed. by Alec Finlay (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1992), pp. 144-5.

⁶ Sleeve note to *Folksongs & Music from the Berryfields of Blair* (Prestige / International INT 25016), 1962; reproduced in Hamish Henderson, *Alias MacAlias*, pp. 102-3; this verse is Hamish's free translation of the last portion of 'Romance de la Guardia Civil española' (The Ballad of the Spanish Civil Guard) by Spanish poet Federico García Lorca (1898-1936):

¡Oh, ciudad de los gitanos!
¿Quién te vio y no te recuerda?
Que te busquen en mi frente.
Juego de luna y arena.

⁷ Track 57712.

⁸ For more on Willie Scott, see Willie Scott, *Herd Laddie o the Glen: Songs of a Border Shepherd*, ed. Alison McMorland (Tryst, 1988, revised 2006); with an introduction by Hamish Henderson.

⁹ See Timothy Neat's two-volume biography of Hamish Henderson: *Hamish Henderson: A Biography. Volume 1 - The Making Of The Poet (1919-1953)* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2007), and *Hamish Henderson: A Biography. Volume 2 - Poetry Becomes People (1954-2002)* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2009).