

# T.S. TOWERS OF SANDAY AND THE CHARACTER OF TRADITIONAL ORKNEY SONG

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An eartly nourris sits and sings,  
And aye she sings, Ba, lily wean!  
Little ken I my bairnis father,  
Far less the land that he staps in.

Then ane arose at her bed-fit,  
An a grumly guest I'm sure was he:  
'Here am I, thy bairnis father,  
Although that I be not comelie.'

'I am a man, upo the lan,  
An I am a silkie in the sea;  
And when I'm far and far frae lan,  
My dwelling is in Sule Skerrie.'

These are the first three verses of 'The Great Silkie of the Sule Skerry' (Child No. 113). This haunting ballad was contributed to Child's collection in 1852 by Captain F.W.L. Thomas RN from 'a venerable lady of Snarra Voe, Shetland' (Child, 2, 494). It is perhaps the best-known text in the cycle of selkie or merman/maid stories, although a measure of that popularity is attributable to the air which usually carries it. This is not as you might imagine a traditional air of long standing but a modern invention, composed by Dr James Waters (Clayre 1968, 188). One scholar, Alan Bruford, has some hard things to say about this melody: 'The tune favoured by most revival singers is of course a modern composition, whose modality might not be out of place in a traditional Scottish song, but whose slow waltz rhythm certainly would' (Bruford 1977, 99); 'the modern composition . . . is attractive enough but for the slow waltz rhythm which is not like anything in traditional Scottish songs' (Bruford 1976, 64). Alan Bruford has recorded two traditional versions of 'The Grey Selkie', complete with tunes, in the Orkney Islands (Bruford 1977, 97-100)<sup>2</sup> and it is this persistence of the selkie ballad in modern sung repertoires that poses a fascinating question: is there a distinctive folk song tradition in the north of Scotland, one distinct and separated from Lowland and Central Scotland, perhaps the result of Scandinavian influence and the unique topography of the islands?

In attempting to answer this question, I find myself greatly indebted to Alan Bruford's patient work in the Orkney Islands, on which much of this discussion will focus. Bruford unhesitatingly identifies this as an 'undoubtedly Orcadian ballad type' (Bruford 1977, 99) which seems to lend some support to the idea of a distinctive northern tradition. It therefore makes an appropriate starting point to begin our search.

It bears stating that this familiar but striking ballad has distinctive qualities. The theme of tragic love is not uncommon, but the emotional triangle created by the selkie, the nouris and the gunner, has an oddly emblematic quality since the protagonists are referred to by role rather than name. As a consequence, the central figures, despite the references (in Child's in particular) to motifs of tangible daily life (spinning and hunting), seem to assume a grander, more archetypal status than that attained by the characters in other tragic ballads. Look for example at Willie and Margaret in 'Clyde's Water (The Mother's Malison)' (Child No. 216), which seems much more personal. This seems likely to suggest the ballad is very old. A magical element is hinted at by the selkie's shape-changing ability and his equivocal status. This is a two-fold ambiguity, for while there is the obvious tension between his two states as man and seal, his authority and prescience suggest he may be more than a mere commoner in his other domain. This gives it resonances not unlike those of Elfland ballads such as the 'Tam Lin' (Child No. 39) or 'Thomas Rhymer' (Child No. 37). The otherworld aspect is reinforced by the uncanny and implacable working out of the selkie's premonition which is stated as fact not as a curse.

The distinctive qualities of this splendid ballad seem to augur a rich seam in sung narrative to be mined in the northern isles. The very position of the Orkneys – isolated as they appear to our Lowland centralist view – seems to confirm this promise, for indeed many aspects of the culture and language of the closest of the north isles are quite distinct from what we call the Mainland and what Orcadians call Scotland (their Mainland being the land-mass on which Kirkwall and Stromness are situated). If the distinctions in relation to Orkney are pointed, then they are even more striking when applied to Shetland and in this case the remoteness of the society has given rise to some characteristic and unusual features. Here, for example, there are some quite distinctive cultural forms in dialect, music (fiddle style) and material culture (knitting patterns), to say nothing of unique animal breeds such as the Shetland collie and pony. All this would confirm the likelihood of finding in Orkney a strong oral tradition and a body of songs quite unlike those recorded further south, especially in the more urban, industrialised areas. We certainly find further apparent confirmation of this theory when we look at the evidence of the Greig–Duncan Folk-Song Collection. The comparative isolation and persistence of a principally agrarian economy into the twentieth century did conserve in the north-east a rich song culture and one with idiosyncratic forms. One thinks of the farm songs and bothy ballads that made such local place-names as Drumdelgie, Strichen and Sleepytoon well-known beyond their own locale.

Now, promising as this seems, we have to be blunt and say that on examining material collected in the area, there is no such fund of exclusively Orcadian material:

the Selkie seems to be a one-off oikotype and not simply one strand of a rich local tapestry. On the other hand, as Alan Bruford's researches and the pages of *Tocher* testify, the Orkneys are rich in tradition and performers. If we are to isolate the distinctive contribution of the north then we must find another way to measure it. To this end it is helpful to turn to the treasury I have already mentioned, the Greig–Duncan collection, and, in particular, the contribution of one man, an Orcadian correspondent named T.S. Towers.

The Greig–Duncan collection requires little by way of introduction here. It was compiled in the north-east of Scotland between 1904 and 1917 and is largely the work of Gavin Greig, schoolmaster at New Deer and James B. Duncan, minister of the Church of Scotland at Lynturk near Alford. Both were highly educated men and among the most gifted in their academic circles. Both had highly developed antiquarian interests and Duncan in particular also brought to the task a rich store of song learned by him and his siblings from their parents. Between them, Greig and Duncan accumulated over three thousand variant word texts and a further three thousand tune versions and, in addition to their systematic trawling and cataloguing of this storehouse, they began the business of analysing the fund of material and relating it to collections and themes gathered elsewhere. This process was developed by Greig in a series of very popular columns in a Peterhead newspaper (*The Buchan Observer*), while Duncan largely confined his observations to the assiduous notes he made to each item. This process was truncated by their untimely deaths – Greig in 1914 and Duncan three years later. Once the full eight volumes of the Collection – currently in production – sit together on the library shelves, it will at last be possible for scholars to complete the task and place this influential collection in context.

One of the trends that Greig did note was the close relationship between north-east balladry and that found in Scandinavian nations. As David Buchan notes (Buchan 1972, 208), Greig was able to use these extensive links to defend the reputation of Peter Buchan, an earlier north-east collector and editor. Buchan's remarkable versions of ballads collected in his native area had prompted claims that he had simply pillaged Danish collections and indeed had fabricated a good measure himself by patching fragments. Greig lists twenty-one Danish ballads with close affiliations to Scottish ballads collected in the north-east. In his view, this was barely scratching the surface: 'If we embodied all Scandinavian balladry in our comparison, the list would be greatly prolonged' (Greig 1925, xxiii). Greig goes on to discuss a number of shared motifs including the well-known 'fancy . . . of trees or flowers growing from lovers' graves and intertwining.' When he does widen the comparison to take in Norse balladry in general, he demonstrates in detail close affinities with 'Binorie' (Child No. 10 'The Twa Sisters') and claims associations between Scandinavian and Scottish balladry, particularly that found in the north-east, in terms of episodic structure, etymology and manner of expression (Greig 1925, xxv).

In his discussion of 'Binorie', Greig notes the various characteristics of the versions he collected, then concludes with two points

which disclose special affinities between our Aberdeenshire versions and those of Scandinavia, and thereby demonstrate that the former are not mere abridgements of other British forms:—

I. Child remarks that 'it is a thing made much of in the Norse ballads that the younger sister is fair and the other dark.' This distinction appears in only two published British versions, apart from Mrs Murison's, but it is actually in *all the twelve* independent versions (the fragmentary C excepted) in our collection.

II. In most of the published forms, British and Norse, the drowning girl offers, if her sister will rescue her to give up her lover; but a certain number, hitherto occurring only among the Norse, 'with more spirit,' as Child says, 'make the girl, after promising to do everything else,' refuse to surrender her sweetheart. It is, therefore, exceedingly suggestive to find four of our twelve versions bringing out this idea. (Greig 1925, 10)

More recent research provides further guidelines for quantifying the extent of the similarities between Scottish and especially Danish folksong. David Colbert, for example, draws attention to a collection of Scandinavian ballads (about twenty) which open with four motifs (Colbert 1978, 7):

- A. A woman sitting in her bower, by a window, or beside her mother, and
- B. doing her needlework,
- C. displays some signs of distress, revealing that
- D. she has (or has had) a lover.

Colbert identifies sixteen different ballads in the Child canon which make some use of this opening formula. A preliminary comparison with Greig–Duncan versions of these ballads is not so quite rewarding but the link is there. Bell Robertson's notes to her version of 'Prince Heathen', for example (Child No. 104; Greig 1925, 81) make reference to this pattern, but she could not actually recall verbatim the verse that gave it. So, while this approach still does not provide us with a huge body of material, the evidence of the Scandinavian connection in the ballad culture is there and Greig's research demonstrates that, in the northern part of Scotland, including the Orkneys, that the connection was a close one, perhaps even the result of a shared rootstock. More recently, David Buchan pursues this northern-Scandinavian linkage and suggests that the same ballad-stories may have entered Britain by two different routes: those in the south demonstrate French influences, while those in the north show a demonstrably Scandinavian bias (Buchan 1970, 70).

This, however, does not take us much closer to isolating a uniquely Orcadian element and at this point I want to strike a new tack. It is perhaps useful to look at a single Orcadian collection, most of which as it happens, was incorporated into the Greig–Duncan collection. This collection, compiled by T.S. Towers, a schoolmaster and native of Sanday, is now in Edinburgh University Library (MS Gen. 767.11).<sup>3</sup> Towers lovingly compiled and calligraphed the twenty-two items that made up his collection in 1900 with the acknowledged aim of concentrating on the music and conserving tunes:

In preparing this small book, I have strictly confined myself to the object I had in view, namely to put into music some old songs which I had often heard sung, but which I had never seen on paper.

It is very probable that a number of errors may have been made: corrections of these will be thankfully received.

Towers' words benefit from some re-reading in an effort to establish his editorial practice. His wish 'to put in music' some old songs is slightly unusual in one sense, for while most collectors believe they are conserving the last embers of an old, but dying, tradition, their preoccupation is more usually with the words of the songs. Towers' stress on music rather than words is the opposite of the usual amateur approach. This reluctance to transcribe the melody is partly due to the low level of musical literacy but there are other more subtle factors which influence this habit of leaving the tunes to fend for themselves. In many cases it is assumed that the tune is well known, but the fact that tunes are frequently applied by singers to more than one song usually means that the words are seen as the characteristic, defining elements of a song. The frequent appearance of printed ballad collections without music seems to reinforce the bias. Most of us now would feel that a song printed without its music is not a song at all but some other, slightly crippled form. The pace and shape of an air may often work a subtle chemistry with that song and transform pedestrian seeming words into a memorable work. Modern collections now attempt to convey the exact character of a particular performance by indicating ornamentation and variations in pace and pitch rather than regularising all of these into a single standard form which may give the casual reader something more straightforward to work with, but which may actually be fabricating by reconstructing. This sort of argument is well known to ballad scholars when, as was more usually the case, it was directed against nineteenth-century collectors and editors who smoothed their text by repairing lacunae and conjecturing 'original' or 'uncorrupted' versions.

We have little hard evidence about Towers' editorial practice whether dealing with music or words, and his words may ring some warning bells since, on first reading, they could suggest that he is at work manufacturing tunes. Accuracy, however, does seem to have been an important concern for him as we can see from his plea for corrections. He seems to have been engaged in acting as a sort of midwife in breaching the transitional ground between oral transmission and book transfer. It is clear that he had some familiarity with printed collections, since his aim is to preserve things he has not already seen in print. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that he was merely concerned with fossilising the last remains as one Border woman suggested Sir Walter Scott had done by publishing his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. She claimed that the songs had been spoiled since they were 'made for singing an' no for reading' and worse still, 'nouth right spell'd nor right setten down' (Hogg 1972, 137). She feared that the ballads had been taken from the mouths of those who did sing them merely to become silent specimens on the page. Not all of Towers' texts have music with them but some do, and his use of tonic sol-fa notation and his notes to the manuscripts show that he was interested in performance:

In the 'Sailor's Return' the performer must subject himself to some difficulty. 'Saying' in the first verse has got only one note with which it must be sung. It is advisable to pronounce it 'saing'. In line 3, first verse 'I'm not' has 1 note only, that is s; hence sung {s.s.}. The verses are somewhat irregular, and so, what suits one does not suit another.

These remarks also apply to 'The Brisk Young Sailor Lad'.

'Jamie and Nancy' contains over 50 verses.

'Sir James the Rose' contains 53 verses.

Towers' collection is a mixture of items – some are clearly derived from chapbook and broadside and some like 'Does your Mother know?' are of more recent origin, perhaps by way of the Music Hall. Many of the songs are narrative in cast though there are none of the classic tragical ballads. The nearest to this is 'James Rose' (Child No. 213, 'Sir James the Rose'), a historical vengeance/murder ballad that was popular in early chapbooks. Some titles hint at a fondness for the drawing-room ballad or melodrama, and I am reminded again of the penchant for pathos and suffering that runs through popular song of this period, seeming to foreshadow the popular contemporary sympathy for country music.

One example of this genre is a sample of the spurned maid confessional:

Miss Betsay Watson is my name,  
I have brought myself to disgrace and shame  
By loving a young man that ne'er loved me  
My folly now I plainly see.

However, only six of Towers' texts are given anything like a full set of words. 'Sir James the Rose' is given with four sample verses and the note that it is fifty-three verses long! The other items are given with sol-fa tune alone – perhaps confirming that the Editor's interest here lies in tune not text.

The items for which Towers gives a full text are all fairly modern. Most pick up the theme of melodrama and pathos already demonstrated in 'Betsy Watson'. The first is 'Poor Old Worn-out Sailor' where 'a poor tar worn out with age' comes through the village begging for charity. He laments that false reports came home of his death, that his wife died and that his daughter has left.

Despise my hull I pray now don't,  
'Cause I've got shabby rigging,  
I'd rather work if I had my limbs,  
Than I'd be seen a-begging.

He is seen by his daughter who welcomes him to her home and family, so the song ends in an upbeat way:

And when you rest in your parting breath  
My duty shall ne'er know failure,  
I'll see you laid in your silent grave,  
You poor old worn out sailor.

The Sailor's Return is in a similar vein: a fair maid in her garden is accosted by a young man who offers to marry her. The maid rejects him, claiming to be unworthy of him and further owning to have already committed her heart elsewhere:

I've got a sweetheart of my own sir,  
It's seven long years since he went to sea,  
And seven more will I wait upon him  
If he's alive he'll return to me.

She refuses his 'costly jewels and richly diamonds', saying:

I would not give one glass of cold water,  
With my poor sailor boy when he comes home,  
For all your lands and for all your riches,  
Though they were numbered a great sum.

There are no prizes for guessing the outcome:

He's taen her up into his arms,  
All for to put an end to strife,  
And the next Saturday they were married,  
And now she lives a sweet sailor's wife.

'The Loss of the Nightingale' paints a scene that is still familiar around the Orkney shores in winter:

On the twenty-ninth of November last  
It blew a cold and a bitter blast,  
It blew a hard and tremendous gale  
To the bottom went the poor Nightingale.

The song is sung by a young woman whose lover's ghost comes to her:

O, Nancy! Nancy! be not surprised,  
In the Bay of Biscay my body lies,  
To become a prey to some shark or whale,  
This was my fate on the Nightingale.

In commenting on a similar sea-disaster ballad, Alan Bruford noted that, 'Such songs of disasters at sea, almost certainly spread through printed broadsides, were common in Orkney and probably all up the Scottish coast: they served as models for local songs about shipwrecks' (Bruford 1971, 91). This gives an important clue towards the Orcadian preoccupations, for the texts we have here in this admittedly small sample do illustrate a strong thematic thread in Towers' collection, and by extension, in Orcadian song narrative. They are all songs of the sea and even where the topic is not so obviously maritime, as in 'Miss Betsy Watson', there is a referential link. Towers gives only the first verse of this song, possibly an indication that it was popular and well known. A fuller text, given in Greig-Duncan (1160C), refers to 'Humber'

(verse 8), a 'watery grave' (verse 9), a 'watery tomb' (verse 12), 'deep waves' (verse 13) and has the girl announce, 'I'll plunge myself into the deep' (verse 9).

The setting and aspect of the Orkneys make this interest in maritime song predictable and entirely appropriate, but the nature of these songs demonstrates an important but commonly repeated flaw in our original premise: the Orkneys, by nature of their maritime traffic, are far from being or having been an isolated community. As Alan Bruford has said in discussing the repertoire of Ethel Findlater, the Orkneys have produced 'a Scots rather than a Norse culture, with especial links with the North-East . . .' (Bruford 1972, 161).

Towers' collection is admittedly relatively small but it does confirm this and shows that, far from conserving some sort of rarified skaldic tradition unlike that of any other part of Scotland or Britain, Orcadian culture was receptive to, even thrived on standard broadsides and chapbooks, and incorporated material from other areas, especially material with a nautical cast due to the dependence on fishing, whaling and other forms of maritime commerce.

Before we leave Towers entirely, it is worth adding that we know that his interest in folksong did not end here. Although a colleague acted as an initial intermediary in sending a copy of Towers' collection to Greig, Towers went on to correspond directly with Gavin Greig and contributed more than a dozen items to the collection. Greig had great respect for his fellow schoolmaster's work, as we can judge by an acknowledgement made for items received for the *Buchan Observer* column. In the course of the same piece, Greig confirms that Orcadian song culture was little different from that of the north-east:

Mr T.S. Towers, Sanday, Orkney, sends me some more records of Orcadian folksong, for which I am much obliged – 'Jocky's Proposal', 'Two sailors walking', 'Whale-fishing', and 'Van Diemen's Land'. My correspondent gives the tunes with the words, and all in a style that would be ill to rival. The records which I have got from Mr Towers and his friend Mr Fotheringham tend to show that the popular minstrelsy of the Orkneys is in the main the same as that of our own district (Greig 1963, item 121).

But where does that take us? It must be said that this has only been a preliminary exploration. A much more extensive exploration of a wider range of texts would be needed. However, even at this stage, some broad conclusions can be drawn. Simply put, we can say that the singing tradition of the north-east and the Orkneys (and by extension that of all the other areas which demonstrate Norse influence in culture and language) does exhibit tangible Scandinavian influence. This influence is evident not so much in direct references to Norse custom and lore, but contributes to the structure and, to some extent to the content and motif pool of traditional narrative ballads.

This Scandinavian influence can be clearly demonstrated and explains the particular texture of some of the material gathered in the north-east (for example by Peter Buchan, Gavin Greig and James Duncan). The parallels between the culture of the agricultural north-east and that of the Orkneys are strong. All that we can say is that

Orcadian singing, based on this admittedly narrow sample, but reinforced by Alan Bruford's work, seems not to be much different from mainland traditions though it does demonstrate a strong preference for material with a maritime reference. The 'selkie' it seems is alone on the beach, a splendid, resonant song that is somehow characteristic of the north isles and yet seems like a curious aberration.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> All references to Child are to F.J. Child, 1882–98 (reprinted New York, 1965).
- <sup>2</sup> These versions are by James Henderson and John Halcro. When this paper was first presented, it began with a version of Henderson's text and tune sung by Elaine Petrie.
- <sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Edinburgh University Library for permission to quote from this manuscript.

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# SCOTS 'TRONE' WEIGHT: PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS ON THE ORIGINS OF SCOTLAND'S EARLY MARKET WEIGHTS

Allen D.C. Simpson

One of the factors which restricts our knowledge of Scotland's medieval trade is uncertainty about the nature of the measurement units in which such trade was conducted. In common with other mercantile nations, Scotland had not only well-defined systems of weights and measures for external and internal trade, but also the legal and administrative structures for enforcing their use. The pressure for conformity in the use of weights and measures came from above: the king's revenue depended on the income from crown lands, from the rentals of his principal subjects and from the customs collected at the royal burghs, and his officials were concerned to maximise results. In turn, these pressures were transmitted down the administrative and social scale to be reflected in all aspects of trade and in all payments exacted in kind.

As might be expected, Scotland's weights and measures evolved over time and were influenced by the metrologies of her principal trading partners, notably by England, Flanders, the Hanseatic League and France. The Scottish system may well have been imported from England by David I and his predominantly Anglo-Norman followers in the twelfth century, replacing earlier measurement units of which only the slightest traces survive. Certainly, there are good reasons to suggest a common origin for the medieval metrologies of England and Scotland.<sup>1</sup>

The first administrative document which describes the weights and measures of Scotland is an assize which has traditionally been ascribed to David I but which in fact has a more questionable status (Thomson and Innes 1884 [hereafter APS I], 673-4). The 'David Assize' appears in a number of the oldest and best respected manuscript compilations of the Auld Laws: undoubtedly its text is early and it may well reflect substantial aspects of the system in use in the period of David I or his immediate successors. However, our view of it must be tempered with the knowledge firstly that the version that has survived in these manuscript collections is similar to an English administrative document, the *Tractatus de Ponderibus et Mensuris*, datable to the mid-thirteenth century (although surviving in a form attributed to about 1300), and secondly that the David Assize also contains adjustments made to the text after the early fourteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

Little specific information about Scottish weights and measures is available in the legislative record until an important (but complex) assize of 1426 (Thomson 1814