

Jock Duncan

The Man and his Songs

JOCK DUNCAN (1925-2021) was brought up in the ballad-rich farming country around New Deer and Fyvie in the Buchan area of Aberdeenshire and was one of Scotland's great traditional singers. His conversations were peppered with stories and experiences from that time – related in the rich Doric Scots dialect of the area. As a singer of the muckle songs and bothy ballads of his native Aberdeenshire, Jock was a tradition bearer of great authority. Moreover, he was the patriarch of a family that made an immense contribution to the Scottish musical tradition. He and his wife Frances had two sons and two daughters. Their sons, Ian and Gordon, would go on to become famous names in piping – Iain as teacher and Pipe Major of the Vale of Atholl Pipe Band and Gordon, a very highly regarded solo piper, who became influential as composer of numerous tunes and innovative styles of playing.

Jock's father, James (1894-1970), had the farm of Gelliebrae beside New Deer and Jock was born there in 1925, Jock's mother Margaret (née Lamb) (1893-1940) had been a teacher and was from Byth. Three years later Jock's father took over the 120 acres at South Faddenhill of Fyvie when Jock's grandfather gave up the farm. Jock grew up to take his part in the every day work of the farm and by the age of 10 he was good enough to be driving a horse at the plough. Living in a self-contained community around New Deer and Fyvie, Jock's family and neighbours made their own entertainment. Many songs were written by the farm workers of the area, the bothy ballads, often critical of the treatment they faced from their bosses, songs about horses, blacksmiths, muckle ferm toons, millers and ploughing matches. As a young boy, Jock would sit and listen to these songs and old traditional ballads like the "Battle of Harlaw" and bothy ballads such as "Bogie's Bonnie Belle" and "Drumdelgie" – all celebrating events that took place in the area.

Like most farming families in the region, the Duncan household was a musical one. One of the major influences on Jock's music was his mother.

"My mother was what I would term 'the stang o the trump' [the best of the bunch], a fine pianist and accompanist to the many fine fiddle players who graced the great splores [house ceilidhs] that she organised in the ben the hoose end at Faddenhill. We could listen or participate – singing the auld Scots songs, the bothy ballads and the new cornkisters of Willie Kemp and George Morris.

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They were my idols – made famous with the advent of their '78' Beltona records in the early 1930s. Halcyon days indeed!"

Jock was just six years old when he heard the song "Hash o Benagoak" written by George Morris¹ of Oldmeldrum and sung by him on a Beltona 78 rpm record – and Jock was captivated by the song: "I thought it was just majestic," he says. After sixty-five years, he finally recorded the song himself on CD.

Jock's elder sister Marion was a great singer and his brother Jimmy played fiddle and took lessons from J F Dickie (1886-1983), a contemporary of the great James Scott Skinner. His father's cousin, Charlie Duncan, often visited Faddenhill, and it was from him that Jock picked up the ballad and style of Harlaw ("Battle of Harlaw" #36) and many old songs including the classic bothy ballad "Drumdelgie" (#17). As a boy, Jock took chanter lessons with piper Peter Elder (ex. of the Scots Guards) who had a 'wee shoppie' beside Millbrex School – where Jock was a pupil. Jock was an expert on the mouth organ and could diddle many pipe tunes, but his forte was singing the songs and bothy ballads of his native Aberdeenshire.

Another major influence was the great traditional singer John Strachan (1875-1950), farmer at the farm of Crichtie the other side of New Deer. Jock's father and mother knew him well and often invited him to the musical gatherings at Faddenhill on many a winter evening. John Strachan brought his songs into the local schools and to the WRI concerts in the local village hall – telling stories and singing songs accompanying himself with a concertina on his knee. Jock remembered, as a youngster in the 1930s, singing along with Strachan and learning "Bonnie Udney" (#7) and "Rhynie" (#47) from him, and singing along the chorus of "Down by the Farmyard Gate" (#20). He also learned songs from George Kidd, the griever at the neighbouring farm – including a very fine version of "The Cruel Mother" (#13), a classic Child ballad. During the war (and earlier) the BBC broadcast an occasional programme of songs and John Strachan stories live from Crichtie. Jock's brother, Fred remembered hearing the programme when out in the desert in North Africa in 1943.²

At fourteen, Jock left school to work on his father's farm. He had been helping out after school and during the holidays since he was eight and could keep up with the men at hoeing when he was only nine, working the horse and cart at ten. Now he was the orra loon – working with the men and the foreman Frank Seivewright on all the tasks of the farm, but also enjoying the crack and the

1 George Morris made over 40 records for the Beltona label during the 1930s, born in Aberdeen in 1876 and died in 1958. He is best known as a singer and writer of Doric comic songs. His father was a farrier with his own business and in due time George too became a blacksmith. In 1912 he married Agnes Kemp, the sister of Willie Kemp, the King of the Cornkisters, and moved to Oldmeldrum in 1919 where the Kemp family ran a hotel business – now Morris's Hotel.

2 In 1930 the American song collector James Madison Carpenter arrived at John Strachan's door with a wax cylinder recorder brought with him from Harvard and he recorded many of John's songs. Other folklorists followed in Carpenter's footsteps: Hamish Henderson of the School of Scottish Studies came in 1951 with Alan Lomax the noted American folklorist and song collector and these recordings have recently been reissued as 'Songs of Aberdeenshire' (Strachan 2002).

bothy ballads, diddling tunes, playing the mouthorgan in the ferm kitchie and beside the glowing peat fire in the chammer. A year or two later he sang in public for the first time at a Meal and Ale celebration in the local hall. Jock never lacked confidence, but the bowls of the traditional mix of meal, ale, whisky, and honey no doubt helped him overcome any inhibitions and sing with confidence and panache.

Jock's family farm worked what is referred to as the 'Chammer System' (chaumer or chamber) where the farm servants were housed in a farm buildings but fed their meals in the farm kitchie – food prepared by the mistress of the house or the kitchie deem, the usually young kitchen lass. As related in the bothy ballad "Drumdelgie":

*At five o'clock we quickly rise and hurry down the stair,
An it's there we corn oor horses, likewise tae straik their hair;
Syne aifter warkin half-an-hour, each tae the kitchie goes,
It's there tae get oor breakfast which generally is brose.*

The chammer at Faddenhill was a room below the granary with an array of box beds and a peat fire for warmth. The granary above was a long room reached by an outside stone stair – and had been used in earlier years for the hairst dance – swept clean ready for the new won grain.³

In 1943, at the age of 18, he joined the Air Force, finishing up in Lyon in France. After the war he returned to the North East, working on his father's farm at Faddenhill. On his return, Jock occasionally sang with John Strachan's bothy ballad concert party before forming his own 'The Fyvie Loons and Quines' (boys and girls in the Doric dialect) that performed around the area.⁴ Jock married his wife Frances in 1950 at St Machar's Cathedral in Old Aberdeen and they then took over Frances' father's farm, Monkshill of Fyvie some three miles west of Faddenhill. There they worked the farm and had their family – Ian in 1950, Moira in 1952, Frances in 1955 and their youngest Gordon in 1964. But the time had come to leave the land and Jock took a job with the North of Scotland Hydro-Electric Board, first to Thurso in Caithness and then to Pitlochry in Perthshire where he and his wife Frances brought up their family and where they resided until well after retirement.

Being out of the North East had now put him out of touch with other singers and on his return visits he found the ballad singing tradition fast disappearing. But Jock never lost the rich Doric speech nor his love of the old ballads and songs nor his sense of 'place' and knowledge of local tradition and history – but for many years his song and ballad repertoire lay dormant.

3 The true 'Bothy System' where the farm servants were housed in separate farm buildings, feeding themselves with supplies of food supplied by the farmer, was rare in the North East and generally found only to the south of Stonehaven in Angus and Fife, the chammer system being the common system on farms throughout Aberdeenshire, Banffshire and Buchan.

4 In 1963 they took part in the qualifier in Inverurie Town Hall for the Grampian Television Bothy Nichts programme against the 'Kingseat Bothy Billies' with Jimmy McBeath – who went on to win.

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Now and again Jock would take part in the local diddling matches – traditional events held at village halls in Angus and Perthshire. In 1977, he entered the ‘Skol’ Bothy Ballad King competition held open air before an audience of over 12,000 on the Haughs of Turriff with an advertised prize for the winner of £500 and the Bothy Ballad King ‘Crown’. Jock took third place with a purse of £100. The winner, Tam Reid of Cullerlie, became the ‘Bothy Ballad King’ and took the Crown and the £500. Then, in 1980, Jock entered and won the Bothy Ballad competition at the Kinross Festival⁵ – bringing him instant recognition among the younger generation of folk song enthusiasts, and beginning a long run of similar successes at folk festivals where his enthusiastic and entertaining renditions became a familiar presence. He won the Bothy Ballads Champion of Champions at Elgin in 1994 – an event sponsored by ‘The Macallan’ – taking home the Bothy Ballad Brose Bowl. In 1996, at the age of 71, he released his first album, *Ye Shine Whar Ye Stan!* with son Gordon playing on a couple of tracks, followed five years later by *Tae the Green Woods Gaen* (2001).

Jock was a link to a bygone age. He was not only a great singer, he was in his own way a folklorist. As a youngster he recorded on paper and later on tape the stories of soldiers from his native North East who had survived the horrors of the First World War. For years these men never spoke to anyone about their experiences but they opened up to Jock. It took many years at the keys of an old typewriter for Jock to transcribe the tapes onto paper. In 2017 the transcriptions were made into a one-act play by Gary West. Early in 2018, they were published in book form as *Jock's Jocks - Voices of Scottish Soldiers from the First World War* by National Museums Scotland (Duncan 2019).

In addition, Jock was a frequent correspondent to the letter pages of the Piping Times and contributor to journals such as *Common Stock*, published by the Lowland & Border Pipers’ Society. His article on 19th century Aberdeenshire pipers, Francie Markis and Robert Barclay that appeared in the March 1990 issue provided insight into the life and place of pipers in the community.

Jock’s family knew that he would spend hours typing in his room at Pitlochry – but knew little of what it was that he was writing. The family knew of Jock’s articles on piping published in the Piping Times, but his son Ian thought he was perhaps also writing an autobiography. In addition to his ‘Voices of Scottish Soldiers’ project he made lists of his songs and pages of song texts. But he also wrote a series of short recollections of life at Faddenhill in the 1930s and 40s – and perhaps he intended this as an autobiography. Some 150 pages of these recollections have now been edited to make the introductory section of

⁵ The Bothy Ballad competition was first introduced by the TMSA Traditional Music and Song Association at the Kinross Festival in 1974 when the ‘Eck Harley Rosebowl’ was won by Charlie Murray of Craigeassie. The same cup is still competed for, now at Kirriemuir Festival, won in 2023 by Allan Taylor of Alford. Jock had been aware of the Kinross Festival for several years before he entered – his elder brother James Duncan won the fiddle competition there in 1975 – but the Kinross dates conflicted with Jock’s local Pitlochry Highland Games where he was organiser of the evening concert. In 1980 he agreed to forgo the Games and came as a guest to Kinross and there he entered and won the Bothy Ballad competition.

the book: Jock Duncan: The Family at Gelliebrae and Faddenhill.

A striking aspect of Jock's performances is not only the richness of his delivery but also his extensive knowledge of the background and context of the songs he sings. When Jock describes the scenes of death and heroism at the Battle of Harlaw it is as if he had been there – at a battle that took place a few miles over the moor but 500 years earlier. Or when he tells of characters like Bonnie Jean of Bethelnie or Bogie's Bonnie Belle, it feels as though they were familiar figures in his own community, which of course they were, but not in his own time.

As a performer, Jock enjoyed physically describing the actions within his songs. For instance, in his hilarious rendition of the "Tradesmen's Plooin Match" (#57), he mimics driving a team of imaginary horses across the stage, complete with instructions and coaxing. However, when it came to recording in a studio, he found the procedure somewhat daunting. Singing with accompaniment was not entirely new to him – old John Strachan had sung with concertina, and his cousin Charlie Duncan had accompanied himself with melodeon – but working with a 'band' in a recording studio was a new experience for him. With the guidance and support of Brian McNeill, a former member of the Battlefield Band who produced Jock's album *Ye Shine Whar Ye Stan!*, he overcame the challenges.

After the release of his first album in 1996, Jock's career flourished further. He was a guest at the EFDSS National Folk Music Festival at Sutton Bonnington in 1998 and at Whitby Folk Week in 2004. He took the stage at prestigious events like Glasgow's Celtic Connections and at the Edinburgh International Festival, where he received a Herald Angel award from The Herald newspaper for his performance of the "Tradesmen's Plooin Match". This formed part of a unique family hat-trick which saw sons Ian and Gordon receive the same award, Ian for his work with the Vale of Atholl Pipe Band and as a piping tutor, and Gordon for his solo piping and composing genius. Jock continued to take part in competitions, often participating and winning – and in later years employed as adjudicator at the same events. In 2006 Jock was inducted into the Scottish Traditional Music Hall of Fame during the Scots Trad Music Awards in Fort William awarded for his major contribution to traditional singing in Scotland, having earlier been made an Honorary Member by the Traditional Music and Song Association (the organisers of traditional music festivals at Kinross, Auchtermuchty, Keith and Kirriemuir): A national treasure twice over!

Jock also gave workshops in schools – engaging with the children, talking about farming, horses and people, singing them a few songs, and working with the youngsters to make drawings illustrating the ideas and images from the songs. This he found immensely satisfying. When singing to the public, Jock understood the importance of keeping people entertained: He knew the value of starting with lighter songs before delving into the longer, more complex, ballads – to engage an audience's interest and enthusiasm.

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Jock's last public performance was at The Old Fruitmarket in Glasgow during the 2012 Celtic Connections festival. Jock spent his last years in Balhousie Care Home in Coupar Angus near his son Ian. He passed away in March 2021 at the age of 95 and is buried in Fonab Cemetery, Pitlochry alongside wife Frances who died in June 2017. Son, Gordon, who died in December 2005, is also buried there as is grandson, Alex who died September 2020.

Jock Duncan was a great ballad singer and one of the last to inherit his songs from a living oral tradition. Many younger singers have been inspired by his songs and by his magnificent style and presence in performance whether in a small intimate gathering or on the concert stage. We may lament the loss of such an outstanding cultural icon – but we will continue to treasure the repertoire of one the great authentic voices of Scots song.

