

Foreword

Where it all Started

EVER since I first heard Jock Duncan sing in the Traditional Singing Competitions at Kinross Festival where he won the Bothy Ballad Cup in 1980, I have been an enthusiast for his singing. I was on the field at Turriff among the 10,000 who had gathered for the Bothy Ballad King Contest in 1977 where Jock came third behind Tam Reid who gained the ‘Crown’ and the £500 prize. When I became involved in the Auchtermuchty Festival in 1981, Jock became a regular participant, either competing, as a guest, or as an adjudicator in the singing competitions. What became clear was that Jock had an extensive repertoire of song that included the popular ‘Corkisters’ of George Morris and Willie Kemp from the 1930s and also many of the older Bothy Ballads dating from the 1800s. But Jock was not just a singer of Bothy Ballads. He certainly won many of the Bothy Ballad competitions at festivals from Kinross and later Auchtermuchty to those at Kirriemuir, Keith, Strichen and of course the famous Bothy Ballad Champion of Champions held annually at Elgin sponsored by ‘The Macallan’ – where he first won the Brose Bowl in 1994, but he also knew many older traditional folk songs and had acquired a number of the great narrative ballads of the North East – ballads included in Francis James Child’s *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*.

Realising the richness of Jock’s repertoire and his magnificent style of performance I was keen to record his singing and to put together an album of his songs for the Springthyme Records label that I ran from my home in Balmacollm, Fife. Jock agreed when I suggested the idea and he came down from Pitlochry for the day in August 1994. Jock arrived with a list of songs that he thought we should try and we recorded a dozen or so on my new DAT recorder machine. I knew that Jock quite liked to sing with melodeon accompaniment as I had sometimes accompanied his singing. We agreed to put together a backing band and in 1996 we were able to release his first album with eighteen of his songs: *Jock Duncan - Ye Shine Whar Ye Stan!*

The sixty songs included in this book have been transcribed from recordings made over a 20 year period from 1994 to 2015. This includes the recordings made for Jock’s CDs on Springthyme and Sleptoon, the recordings made at the Fife Traditional Singing Festival over several years, and radio performances and interviews made for the BBC and for the Pitlochry Community Radio

Station. The particular recording used for each transcription is noted beneath each song and the full list of Jock Duncan recordings is given in the appendix. A new compilation CD will be available on Springthyme later in the year Jock Duncan – Aikey Brae to Ythanside (SPRCD 1045).

As Jock relates in his autobiographical section of the book, he was interested in song from a young age, acquiring songs in the 1930s from the workers on the family farm at Faddenhill of Fyvie in the rich farming land of Buchan in Aberdeenshire, from the friend and neighbour of his father's the famous John Strachan of Crichie, from Wullie Allen and his wife Jean who had retired to nearby Tifty Croft and his father's cousin Charlie Duncan who had retired to a croft on the Hill of Belnagoak after a life as a horseman on the large farms of the Buchan area, one-time foreman at nearby Netherton of Millbrex, and who was a fine singer of the old songs, accompanying himself on the melodeon. Jock also knew and became friends with noted traditional singers Jimmy MacBeath, Davie Stewart, Charlie Murray, Sheila Stewart and others. The older generation of singers were a source of inspiration and were bearers of a still largely oral tradition.

Jock's father's friendship with John Strachan and family was certainly of great importance to Jock. When his father brought John Strachan into the musical gatherings, the 'Splores', at Faddenhill it was not just the stories and songs that fascinated Jock, but the big narrative ballads and the rich Doric conversations. John Strachan, who farmed at Crichie near New Deer, had already become well known as an important tradition bearer of Scots song and story and was a regular broadcaster on the BBC with programmes of song and conversation recorded around the fireside at Crichie. According to Jock, John was himself not overly keen on the long ballads - but Jock loved to hear them.

The bothy ballads, as a song form, seem to have evolved in Scotland's North East in the 1820s, but it was the decision of Beltona, a London based record company to record two singers, George Morris and Willie Kemp that brought about what can only be described as a revolution in the popular culture of the North East. Jock described these two characters as the 'pop singers' of his era and an inspiration. We may nowadays wish to distinguish between the older Bothy Ballads of the 1800s and the later 'Cornkisters' of Morris and Kemp – the latter composed as entertainment for stage and radio and including an intentionally rich Doric vocabulary. But to the rural population of Buchan and North East Scotland they were and are but part of a continuity – along with a third generation of Bothy Ballads from the pens of such as Charlie Allan of Methlick with his song "Lonely in the Bothy" or Ian Middleton of Arradoul with his repertoire of new songs including "The Humble Tattie" and "The Travelling Mill".

At the turn of the century the riches of folk song in the North East were known to Gavin Greig, schoolteacher at White Hills, New Deer when he gave his retiring presidential address 'Folk Song in Buchan' to the Buchan Field Club in 1905. But it was a revelation to him when he started his weekly articles

in the *Buchan Observer* in December 1907, publishing a song or two each week and asking his readers for songs. In the following four years hundreds of songs were contributed by correspondents. Over the next decade Greig and fellow field-worker the Rev James B Duncan garnered several thousand song and ballad texts and tunes. The *Buchan Observer* articles containing some 600 song texts were then published in a very limited edition in two volumes of just 42 bound sets as *Folk Songs of the North East* (1909, 1914), later republished in a further limited edition by Folklore Associates, Pennsylvania in 1963 – but the song texts were otherwise unobtainable. The republication of the original edition as a single volume was at the instigation of the American folklorist Kenneth Goldstein and Gavin Greig's great grandson Arthur Argo (Greig, 1963) and this certainly brought attention to the need to find a way of bringing the complete Greig-Duncan collection into print. The volume also included a republication of Greig's retiring presidential address 'Folk Song in Buchan' to the Buchan Field Club of 1905.

The Child Ballads from the *Buchan Observer* articles were separately published as *The Last Leaves of Traditional Ballads* in 1925 and this no doubt had some public circulation. However, the complete collection of North East songs brought together by Gavin Greig and his collaborator James Duncan only became available to the wider public when they were published as the *Greig Duncan Folk Song Collection* (1981-2002), and more recently a selection from the Collection has been published as a 'Selection for Performers' edited by Katherine Campbell (2009). The magnificent collection of some 4000 songs had been secreted in the Aberdeen University Library for half a century, rarely consulted other than by a few persistent folk enthusiasts.

There is no doubt that Jock gained most of his songs directly from other singers – the oral tradition. But printed song collections were important as a source of song texts and certainly contributed to the continuity of the singing tradition at that time. Two collections were widely available: Robert Ford's *Vagabond Songs and Ballads of Scotland* of 1898 and 1904 and John Ord's *Bothy Song and Ballads* of 1930. Jock was given a copy of Ord around 1935 by a neighbouring farmer Jimmy Cardno and his wife Edith who were enthusiastic for Jock's singing and Jock always treasured his volume of Ord. Jock may also have had access to the 1963 republished edition of *Folk Songs of the North East* (again texts only) as copies of the volume were used by the Traditional Music and Song Association of Scotland (TMSA) as prizes for winners of the Traditional Singing and Bothy Ballad Competitions held at their festivals in Kinross, Auchtermuchty and Keith in the 1970s and 80s – festivals at which he was a winner on several occasions. Over the years Jock became a 'song collector' writing down song texts as an aide to memory, later using a small cassette recorder to record songs and stories from farm servants, farmers, blacksmiths and millers in his Buchan homeland. The reminiscences he recorded interviewing men who had fought in the Great War became the book *Jock's Jocks: Voices of Scottish Soldiers from the First World War* edited from Jock's typescripts by Gary West

(2019). Jock also spent many hours writing his own life story in the hundred or so biographical essays that are the basis of the autobiographical section of this book – hours devoted on Sunday mornings to typing on his manual typewriter. These hundred or so pages of typescript were found by Jock's son Ian among his father's papers and the family have very generously made these available to include in edited form in this volume.

I hope that this volume will stand as a lasting tribute to Jock Duncan, his life and his songs and will throw a light on a way of life that has changed so greatly in less than a century.

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