Jeannie Robertson: Portrait of a Traditional Singer

HERSCHEL GOWER

First discovered and recorded by Hamish Henderson in 1953 while he was collecting in Aberdeen, Jeannie Robertson Higgins is by all counts 'the monumental figure of the world's folksong' which Alan Lomax flatly declared. Her first tapes were placed in the School of Scottish Studies some fifteen years ago. Since that time the number of items has steadily increased so that the total repertoire now runs well over a hundred hours. It includes approximately twenty Child ballads, an equal number of ballads originating from Broadsides, bothy songs, scores of lyrics, children's songs and verses, and a variety of extended tales and anecdotes. In addition to the interpretative materials interspersed with the songs, there are at least six separate tapes which deal chiefly with the singer's memoirs and her recollections of the 'travelling clans'.

However difficult this mass of material is to deal with because of its volume, however tedious because of its diversity, the Jeannie Robertson collection of tapes offers opportunities for investigation not actually open to the researcher until the appearance of the tape recorder and an indefatigable collector like Hamish Henderson. One can suggest the historical importance of the collection—at the same time recognising its calculated lack of discrimination—by recalling one or two of the more obvious omissions in the annals of folksong. For example, Sir Philip Sidney might have named his 'blinde Crouder' and left us with a few faithful transcriptions. Besides setting down accurate texts, Sir Walter Scott might have been less cavalier about Mrs Hogg, if he were going to print her songs, and answered questions having to do with biography, interpretation, and the actual milieu of the Border shepherd. In other words, Scott and the early collectors might have allowed the singers to speak directly to the audiences who were to take the time later on to evaluate the culture in which the songs took hold. With the sound recordings of this century and the heterogeneous materials they are capable of bringing to the archives, we may come considerably nearer ultimate aims. We can at least arrive more easily at a broader view of the milieu than could earlier recorders and historians.

It is the aim in the instalments which follow to present a transcript of pertinent materials from a single important singer. As Hamish Henderson has pointed out, Jeannie Robertson, as a member of the traveller folk culture, 'takes in the tradition of

the settled Scots and goes beyond it'. This first instalment makes available in print her own autobiographical reflections and some of her comments on music and texts.

Although selectivity is an obvious necessity, there is every attempt to be faithful to the whole repertoire, the style of rendition, the personality, speech, and mannerisms of the singer. The editor recognises that during the past fifteen years a few articles written for popular journals have attempted to publicise the forceful characteristics of Jeannie Robertson as singer and story-teller. Some of her tunes have been sketchily transcribed in a manner which oversimplifies the complexities of the rendition. Some of the accompanying texts exhibit a variety of errors. This is not to say that Jeannie Robertson is easily confined to print or satisfactorily represented in five lines and four spaces. With the expert assistance of Robert Garioch on the texts and James Porter on the tunes, however, the editor believes the transcriptions which follow are more nearly faithful to the original than any yet attempted.

Born in 1908 in Aberdeen and christened Regina Christina, Jeannie was the youngest of the five children of Donald Robertson and his wife Maria Stewart. Both sides of the family were derived from the tinker stock of the Northeast, the hardy travellers who sold their goods from house to house in summer, lived in caravans or camps, and settled in Aberdeen in winter. Jeannie's recollections of travelling Dee-side and Don-side as a girl and later with her husband, Donald Higgins, are told in her own words in the interview which follows.

Interview: Jeannie Robertson and Herschel Gower

HG The packman, as I understand it, has just about gone out in Scotland—with better roads and vans and automobiles in the country districts—so I would like to hear about travelling and travellers forty or fifty years ago when you sold in the country.

JR So many vans going around nowadays has done the packman out. We lived in Aberdeen six months out of the year and travelled the other six in a caravan. We always used to travel with members of my mother's family, the Stewarts. When we come to some of the campin' grounds, there were other families—no relation to you, but travellers too.

HG And this would be mostly along Deeside?

JR Deeside and Donside. You would leave Aberdeen and you'd go by Coulter—and from Coulter you'd go up to Banchory—and maybe there were camps between these places, lovely camps—and then from Banchory maybe up the Boyne and to Ballater and Braemar—all these places. I've walked in one day fae Braemar and went richt oot o'er the Devil's Elbow and then to Blair and four mile above Blair to St Fink. That was thirty-eight mile in one day.

HG What about feeding the horses?

JR Oh that was simple. In the summer time there's any God's amount o' grass, which you can shear. You can shear the roadside—beautiful grass on the roadside—and you

PLATE II Hamish Henderson, Jeannie Robertson, Herschel Gower. Interview in B.B.C. studios, Aberdeen, June 1968

PLATE III Jeannie Robertson in conversation

either had a heuck—but it was mostly a scythe—for cuttin'. But mostly our folks yoked up their horses intae the float and took the scythes for shearin' the grass for the horses. Feedin' the horses was no bother at all. We kept some oats for them—maybe you got corn or bran or whatever it was—ye kept this for the beast and ye gied it a feedin' maybe ance a day. Ye tied the horses up at nicht and put a heap o' grass in front of them and the horses ate this a' nicht.

HG Tell me, where did you get the articles that you carried along in the caravan? The stuff that you sold.

JR Oh, well, we went to the wholesale shops and maybe sent to England for them—to places where ye got them cheaper. They were manufactured away about Birmingham, London, or some of these places. And Scotland. We sold carpets, blankets and sheets, and curtains, and curtain material—dresses, blouses, aprons, everything. Auld looms and spinning wheels at hame had gaed oot by my time. I've seed me takin' my pack and also a thing wi' fancy bits o' jewellery and scent and a' that kind o' stuff too, because you might get a young girl workin' in a hoose or at the back o' a hotel that's nae goin' to buy sheets or blankets fae ye, but she wad buy a bonnie brooch or a bonnie necklace or bottles o' scent or something. Ye had to carry a' that.

HG Then after the caravans stopped, you'd have a campfire there, I take it, and you'd gather around in the evenings for entertainment.

JR There was plenty fine big thick logs and sticks and things that you got. And if ye were goin' to a camp that you knew it was scarce o' firewood, you took a big heap o' sticks and stuff on wi' ye—enough to do you the nicht—and then you did the same ae ither nicht. Or when ye were comin' hame after the day's work, ye filled your lorry full of fine thick sticks.

HG Then where did you sleep?

JR Well, you slept in your caravan. It was jeest like a hoose. Wers was the last caravan that was up and doon the Deeside and it was made at the Tollcross of Glesca and there werena a bonnier thing in the place fat it was. Beautiful thing it was. Big, four-wheeled, owre top pure green. It was fat we called a bow-toppit wagon—nae a square wagon—it was bow-toppit. Then you had a bed made intill it, a full size bed. And below you opened up doors and there was another bed—that was for the family—you had a full size bed in the top—a little wee windae at the back where there were bonnie wee curtains on top. You put the same curtain material through over the top of the front o' your bed—beautiful done—

HG It was a wooden bed?

JR Yes, perfectly made intill your waggon. Stationary. And wer bunks were alang the side o' the wagon—at your feet—and wers were egg-shell-beautiful—bonnie, bonnie glossy paint—pure eggshell blue painted. It was all eggshell-blue in the inside. Then we had a fire. We had a beautiful big overmantel in the waggon and you had a beautiful fireplace, and then fittin' in the fireplace was a Queen Anne stove. At one side ye had a little wee oven far ye cud keep food hot or far ye cud make a pie. I used to

make often little loafs and pit in it—nae plain loafs—nice loafs, because ye cud've got plenty plain loafs. Wi' plenty coal and sticks in it, ye were nae time makin' a big pot o' soup or a stew or anything. Then your floor was covered wi' linoleum and maybe a nice carpet above it. And at this side o' the fire there was a great big glass right doon. You opened it up and pit your coats and your dresses in there. And there were a double row o' drawers at this side o' yer bed and that side o' yer bed where ye pit most o' yer things too. If ye had stuff to sell, ye jeest kep them in the big parcels as ye brocht 'em. At the back o' the wagon, a big thing comes oot and it wad haud twa hunnerd weight o' stuff covered in. It was a kind o' rack. And in below that was the bandbox and ye opened it up and that was for keepin' yer stuff—I mean yer eatables—you filled it full o' eatables. The wagon was beautifully painted—yeller, green, and red—it was all beautiful designs and horses' heids and things, and the big hubs on the wheels was solid brass. Well, a man that took pride in his wagon—the hubs o' the wheels—you would see yer face in it. The two big lamps at the front—great big beautiful lamps—would be worth a fortune today. Solid brass. Every wee bit o' fancy thing on aboot the wagon was a' brass.

HG And what did you burn in the lamps?

JR Oh, well, for the lamps on the road, it was candles at that time. Paraffin would be dangerous for fire. It was jeest the candles fit intae your lamps. No, I've seen it a very bad cold nicht when we were late gettin' on the road. Unforeseen things happen fat can sometimes keep ye on the road till it's maybe dark—and cold—and I've seed me in the wagon, and the bairns in the wagon, very comfortable and a nice fire on in the wagon—and the place lovely—you keep your place clean to suit yersel'—if ye dunnae keep it clean, then ye're lazy: there must be something wrang wi' ye—if ye're lookin' for comfort and things, ye keep your place clean and tidy—I've seen my bairns in the bed and me in the wagon settin' and me cookin' the men's supper. And then when we come to this place, the supper was ready. But ye cannae dee that wi' a camp. You've got to pull and mak ye supper and carry on to the place that ye want to live in.

HG But you could cook as you were moving?

JR Yes, I could cook as I was movin' in this wagon. We bought this last wagon during the war and left Aberdeen. You see, me and Donald, we had a hoose—we always had a hoose—and we got bombed on every side o' us. (For a few years before the war come on, we didn't go out. Donald didnae like campin' very well. But when the war did start, a haill street o' people was killed and it was only a matter o' a few yards awa' fae us.) The haill street was cleaned oot. That was Charles Street that was right across from our auld hame. Well, my husband said, 'You goin' to go to the country, because we cannae stay here'. Nichts he wasnae gettin' rest. And it was funny but I cudnae bide in the hoose when the sirens went. I had a smothery kind o' feelin' wi' a terrible fear. So Donald said, 'I'm gang to the country and not jeest set here and be blewn to dust'. And that's the God's truth. And I said, 'Well, we cannae jeest rise and run. Ye need *some* money. Or maybe we'll live frae day to day, wantin' for nothin'.' But then we hadnae no money tae gang intill the country. And if ye're gaun to the country, you need a

hame if it's cauld weather. But him no bein' too strong either, Donald was beginnin' to be—I suppose he was gettin' workit up wi' nerves and things. My boy was deid by this time and my girl Lizzie was jeest a bairn in school. So I said, 'We'll gang tae the country', after the next bombs had killed forty people. But we didnae hae the money tae buy the caravan, and I said, 'I suppose I'll jeest have to bide in a camp'. And we had been bidin' in the hoose so lang that we had turned saft. But we was tired o' the carry-on every nicht—the very toon shook, the hoose was full o' folk, screamin' bairns, greetin' women and faintin', and ye've no idea fat it was like. So Donald gaed oot the nicht afore me and put up a camp for me comin' oot.

HG And where was this?

JR He didnae gae far. He went oot by Coulter. That's nae far fae Aberdeen. It's a good few miles but nae far. We were safer. Within another day or two we went into Banchory and stopped near the mooth o' a big forest and built a hut oot o' wood and covered the roof with a tarpaulin cover, like fat you see at the stations. You cud buy them at that time. Then we got a canvas to cover the floor and carpets. It was jeest quite comfortable. Of course, you couldna have no blazin' fires on the outside. Aebody had a fire on the inside, so you cud sit comfortable on the inside, hear stories, and a sang, and a bit music. And yet when ye were inside, ye were covered up because the trees sheltered ye.

HG And at this time did you know any of the other folk who were there?

JR Yes, you knew them. Some o' them were relations and some was not, but still you had plenty company.

HG Your earlier experiences as a child and after you and Donald were married would have stood you in good stead because you knew how to shift for yourself.

JR Aye, we was brought up till it. Although we always lived in a hame, our people knew fat to do. When the wather was cauld and things, we always managed. We never wanted. And we now werena afeard of the bombs. We heard them, mind you. We cud stand there and look doon and see Aberdeen gettin' bombed ony nicht, every nicht. So we lived there during the winter in the hut and when the summer come on, by this time we bought a horse and harness and a float. And then we went awa' through the country in the float. By then the fine weather was in and we workit at government work—pulling flax. In wer country they grew the flax, and the government paid you when you were finished pulling the flax. And then we saved up the money—I didnae work all the time at the flax, I workit on my ownio—and what money that we saved we bought this wagon. It was a beautiful wagon. It was made in Glesca. We sent the money up and bought it from people who was very weel off and by this time they had gotten a lovely place to bide.

HG Would the one horse pull it?

JR Oh, yes. A good big horse could pull it. Nae a little horse, but a good big strong horse. That's what ye needed—a good big strong solid quiet animal.

HG And where was Donald's brother Isaac at this time?

JR Isaac was with us. By this time he also had a horse and float and he had his ain camp —a army camp—Isaac always liked his ain way o' doin'. But Isaac was always wi' us—since he was sixteen past.

HG I suppose there was a lot of singing.

JR That was the only thing we had to pass the time by. Men maybe playin' the pipes—maybe aboot poachin' for rabbits because the rabbits was guid at that time—but when they give them that disease we wadnae look at them again—I never did look at them again. But for years and years in the war the beasts was guid and everything was rationed —even to a bit o' biscuit, a can o' beans was rationed, a can o' peas, your sugar, everything, the very biscuits, the very sweeties.

HG So this time you didn't do any selling but went out into public works?

JR Yes, we started sellin' agin, because the time o' the war was the best time for sellin'. Things to sell were scarce though. If you could have got the stuff, we'd be well off today. But what you did get, you could sell it. The people in the country was glad to get a body comin' to their door.

HG How long did you stay on the road this time?

JR We had the caravan aboot three or four year before we sold it. It was a beautiful wagon. And once when my girl Lizzie was sick and I had a big pot o' soup on and a big fire in the stove and the lamp lighted, the doctor come doon frae Banchory. Mind you, he was amazed when he come in. He says, 'My God, what a lovely smell. What's in the pot?' I says, 'Aye, doctor, but it has a better taste.' It was the only waggon that was really on the road at that time. Wagons was goin' oot o' fashion. We had good horses and that was the best thing.

HG Perhaps we could say, without a great deal of exaggeration, that the folksong revival started right there. When you took back to the road you kept the old songs going. You must have remembered many from your mother and your mother's people.

JR Yes, mony's the time you might see seven or eight families at the camp fire. You had got to have somethin' to pass the time by. You had no pictures, no dance hall—not that I was ever in a dance hall in my life. Amongst my people there was fiddlers, accordian players, squeeze box players, mouth organ players, pipe players, and sometimes a lot of very good singers.

HG And by being there you had a chance to sing some of the songs you had learned from the last generation.

JR Oh, yes. It's funny that I never learned no songs after people later. The younger people at that time was singin' mostly up-to-date songs—cowboy songs or somethin' like that. Unless it was some auld body. I've sung mony a time around a camp fire. That was when I was jeest at my very level best. Wi' a big fire and a cup o' tea and somethin' good goin', we could sing a' the better.

HG I read in the programme for the Mermaid Theatre in London that you were discovered in 1953, when you were in your mid-forties. Tell us how you were discovered.

JR Well, that was a strange thing that happened too. The year before I was discovered,

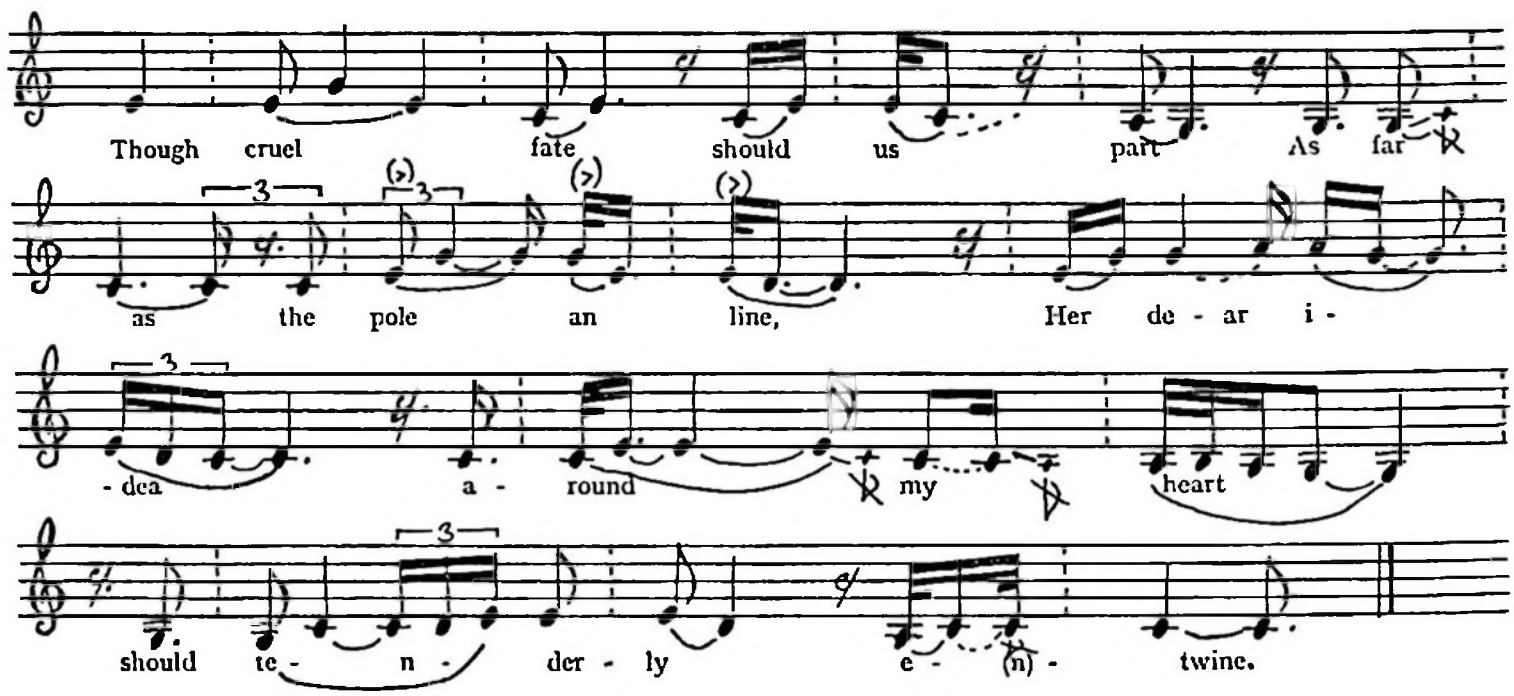
I heard Hamish Henderson and Alan Lomax on the wireless speakin' aboot auld sangs. But I never seed 'em. We never seed folks like that. At the time we was livin' at 23 Causeway End and I was puttin' oot the supper—when I heard them discussin' the sangs. And I says, 'That man's speakin' aboot auld sangs'. Jeest like that. I was impressed at listenin' to them. So I said to Donald and Isaac: 'If those men only kent to come up to Cassie End, I cud give them a good few auld sangs.' I still never forgot them. So Hamish happened to be doon in the Castlegate the year after it—in the Castlegate o' Aberdeen—and he knew travellers when he saw them, and he'd went in aboot the stalls and amongst people who'd workit in the midst o' 'em, and he started to ask 'em about sangs. One was Bobby Hutchison who used to say to me, 'God bless me, Jeannie, I like to hear an auld sang when it's sung decent'. Well, mony's the time I wad sing him an Irish sang—and this sang and that sang. Some o' them he heard his people singin'. It happened to be that Bobby was on the Castlegate at the time when Hamish was speakin' aboot collectin' auld sangs. 'If you want a puckle o' auld sangs,' he said to Hamish, 'go up to Jeannie Robertson'—he never even said my married name—'at 21 Cassie End. You cannae go wrong.' That was fifteen years ago—almost. So Hamish comes up and the knock comes to the door and here's this great big man in a beautiful Highland dress. Oh, he was beautiful-dressed that day, real military lookin' he was. But I said, 'I'm too tired to think aboot singin'. I'm that tired I'm ready to collapse. I cudnae sing for naebody today.' But Hamish was nae easy to put awa'. I wadnae put him awa', mind ye, God forgive me I never put naebody awa' from my door in my life—let him be rich or poor. So I says, 'If you like you can come back at night when I'm no so tired—say aboot maybe eight or nine o'clock, whichever is suitable to you, but I cudnae sing in the meantime.' He says, 'Couldn't I just come in for three or four minutes?' I said, 'Oh, look, I'm gang to let nae ither body come in and tak' my mind off my rest. I must get a rest.' He lookit at me and seed I was jeest the picture o' health and had mysel' a' dressed, for at that time I was awfu' particular. But mind you I was well enough at that time and I lookit very young for my age. I wadnae gae ill, and the very first thing in the mornin' I was aye decked up to the ninety-nines. They used to cry me the Lady o' the Lake, and that's the God's truth. I likit mysel' aye lookin' nice. It was keepin' my sister-in-law's bairns that day that had been greetin' and gettin' on my nerves that had made me ready to fa' doon to my bed. But Hamish got the boy—who was jeest five past at the time—to sing till him. A bonnie wee laddie. My brother's bairn he was—you see Donald's sister married my brother. And after the bairn had sung several of Auntie Jeannie's sangs, Hamish stayed on to tea and I sung for him steady till two o'clock in the morning. I never got my rest—nae rest that day, you see. And that's the God's own truth if I never rise from this chair.

HG Jeannie, I believe you had some of the broadsheets that were printed on the hand-press at Fintry and circulated when you were a child. Tell me, have you heard of cases where people bought broadsheets and would have the words to a song and then would make up their own tunes?

JR Aye, I could make a tune for some of those ballads or sing them to an auld-fashioned air. I could put my ain air to them if I didnae like the air they named. I have sangs that I put the air till mysel'.

HG Could you sing us one of these?

JR Here's a poetry called 'Cruel Fate' that Burns wrote to his Jean when he was planning to go to the West Indies and they were to be parted for good. I didnae have a tune to the words, so I made up my ain, like I have for several.



Though cruel fate should us part
As far as the pole an line,
Her dear idea around my heart
Should tenderly entwine.

Though mountains frown and deserts howl
And oceans roar between
Yet dearer to my deathless soul
I still wad love my Jean.*

* The original appeared with the author's name in Vol. 2 of *Johnson's Musical Museum*, 14 February, 1788 to be sung to 'The Northern Lass'. The full text follows:

Tho' cruel fate should bid us art,
Far as the pole and line;
Her dear idea round my heart
Should tenderly entwine.
Tho' mountains rise, and deserts howl,
And oceans roar between;
Yet, dearer than my deathless soul,
I still would love my Jean.

I'll tell ye the God's truth. I got the words but there was no air till it. It's in the Burns book without an air. By the God's truth the air's mine. I can make up airs, I can. It's only a small two verses and I saw it in a Burns auld, auld song book—a big auld song book, lang, lang ago, when I was jeest a lassiekie. But there was no air attached till it. So therefore I put a hauntin' kind o' air till it mysel'. My mother sung a lot o' Burns's songs. You see, us people goin' oot, many's and many's the auld, auld books o' Burns we've pickit up. At school we sung 'The Banks o' Doon' to one air, but the air that I sing to it now was from a man I heard singin' it and I fancied it. I likit his air better.

HG Do you have any opinion about this—which is more important, the tune of a song or the text of a song?

JR Do you mean the words or the tune? Well, to tell the God's truth, I like them baith. If the words are good, I like the words. When I was a bairn, I wadnae learn a sang off my mither—she'd plenty o' sangs—if the air wasnae bonnie. I didnae like it, though the words was guid. When I was a bairn the air caught my fancy first. I learned the air first, and I think if you get the air o' a sang, the words are nae ill to learn. The words or the idea would come second. That's my opinion. And once you get the air in yer heid, then ye can easily learn the words, it doesnae matter who has the ballad. You know how lang it took me to learn 'Lord Donald'? It's the longest sang I've got. I learned it from a young chap in one night's time. But it wasnae only because o' the air wi' it. It appealed to me as a good story.

HG Why do you think so many people ask for 'Lord Donald'? Is it because of the air or because of the story?

JR Because it's a fine air and a good story.

HG The question that I'm really trying to get at is what do you think makes some songs more popular than others—the story or the music?

JR The music *and* the story. It's got to be a combination of both.

HG If it had to be that one was more important than the other, which do you think is the more important?

JR Well, the words, I suppose, appeal tae people, and I suppose if it's a bonnie air it appeals tae people. Both o' them.

HG You mentioned earlier that you had owned a Burns song book years ago. Do you have any stories about Burns?

JR Well, again amongst auld folk I heard this one. I heard that Burns went across with a boat to Ireland. When he landed at the other side into Ireland—from Ayrshire—the boat hauled up along the quay, you see, and there was a crowd of people waitin' for some of their people comin' off. So the great Irish poet was there. (Now this may be jeest a story, I don't know.) But they called him McGee and he was a poet. So he was standin' on the quay and he looks into the boat and he sees this people standin'. So he lookit at this man specially which had tooken his attention. There's nae doubts about it, Burns had aboot him somethin' that wad have taken people's attention. That's true. And he said:

By the cut of your hair
And the clothes that you wear
I ken you are Burns
Frae the auld toon o' Ayr.

So Burns lookit up at him and he said:

You're on the land
And I'm on the sea:
By the cut o' your gob
I think you're McGee.

HG Jeannie, I believe you have another story—quite a humorous one—that shows how Burns could make a witty poem aboot a person or a situation right on the spur of the moment.

JR Aye, if ye did somethin' or ye walkit in aboot or if you were good-lookin' or somethin' like that, Burns always had somethin' to say. He could always make up this bit o' poetry within a minute or two aboot them. You see, he had that gift. This was his wee bit o' poetry aboot Lady Mathilde—

HG Jeannie, tell me where you got this story? Do you remember?

JR Well, I actually learned this story long ago, when I was jeest a little girl, and I didn't understand the full meaning of it. I got it from my mother, but it wasnae actually my mother's story. It might have been my grandfather's because very often at night, when we was all campin' oot in the summer, my grandfather was a great story-teller and every night he used to tell young and old stories. And we all gathered round the fire, making tea and keeping on big fires at night, at the camps, and then my grandfather told stories.

HG Was he a singer as well?

JR Oh yes, my grandfather could sing too.

HG And of course all the folks admired Burns. He was a common man, and a man who had a lot of talent. Everybody enjoyed his songs.

JR Oh yes, all auld people did like Burns's stories and songs.

HG Tell us the story then as you remember it from your grandfather and your mother.

JR Well, this is how I heard the story. You see, there was a great lady called Lady Mathilde. And as far as I heard she was a poet too. But she was very wealthy and had a big beautiful castle-hoose and plenty o' money and everything. So—the only thing I can't tell in my story is where she come from. But she said that she wad like to have Burns come to her hoose and that she wad send for him. She kenned a lot aboot him. She heard aboot 'im bein' a great poet and she also heard that Burns could make up poetry aboot ye by jeest lookin' at ye. Within a few minutes he could make up a bit o' poetry aboot ye. Especially if ye did somethin'. So she sent for Burns and Burns did come to this big fine castle-hoose and this Lady Mathilde had it full o' gentry, you see, and they was all settin' in the big beautiful hall, settin' round it, but the middle o' the

floor was empty. So when Burns come in at this door she put a drink intill his hand and he was nae dressed to come in amangst gentry because at this time he was jeest a poor man, he was jeest a plooman, and he was dressed like a plooman when he did come intill the hoose. He had his auld guttery-sharney boots on—no very weel dressed. But nevertheless it was Robbie Burns. And she pit a drink intill his hand, you see. But all in a sudden Lady Mathilde gathered hersel' up and Burns wondered in the name o' God what was wrong wi' 'er, you see, because naebody in a fact kenned in the hoose what she was goin' to dae. She was keepin' it as a kind o' a surprise. And all in a sudden she gathered hersel' up in the front o' Robbie Burns and she gaed flyin' right frae one end o' the hall tae the other end o' the hall, and as she was flyin' she was imitatin' the cock crowin' and flyin', both at the same time. She imitated the cock cryin' oot 'Cock-a-loo-ra-loo' and she was fleein' way up the hall. Now Burns lookit after that a wee bitty surprised, you see, and when she gaes up tae the end o' the hall where there was another door, she flew right up tae this door. Burns lookit at her for a minute or two, and he still had his glass o' whusky in his hand and he raised up his glass o' whusky and he said:

Mathilde tae the door she flew
Tae imitate the cock she crew.
She cried jeest like the little sinner
You wad actually thocht the cock was in 'er.

So that was his wee bit o' poetry aboot Lady Mathilde.

HG Jeannie, I'd like to hear you tell something of the background of the 'Johnie Cocke' story because it is not always clear to a lot of listeners nowadays.

JR Well, first o' a', the 'auld wife' in the first verse is Johnie's mother. She's nae his wife. I've heerd folk ask after a body's auld wife and that means their mother. Now the seventh forester in the story was the heid forester and he had thocht himsel' a 'big lad'. But you see, more than that, he was Johnie's nephew—his sister's son.

HG Then the ballad not only shows the conflict between the law and the common man, but it also reflects the conflict in the family itself.

JR Yes. And believe you me, when a common man gets to onything like that—a job like that—he's worse than the real top man—the gentry—worse than the man in the big hoose. He's worse than him.

HG In other words, give a small man some authority, and he overdoes it.

JR Put a beggar on horseback and he'll ride to hell. That's the God's truth. That's an auld sayin' and it's true yet. When Johnie was sleepin', the six foresters had a better chance—because they were afraid o' him otherways. Because he was a great man wi' the arrows himsel', and he caud kill, and they were afeard o' him. Jeest like a man wi' a gun that was a guid shot—well, he was the same wi' arrows. If it come to a combat of usin' their fists, then Johnie caud do that too, you see.

HG When your version has Johnie say

I will kill a' you six foresters
And brak the seventh one's back in three. . . .

What does this mean in terms of the action?

JR It means that he used his arrows upon the six foresters—he was a first-class crack shot wi' the arrows—he returned arrow for arrow—and he broke the seventh one's back in three. He catched him by hand and wounded him and then broke him up.

HG Of course he recognised the seventh forester as his nephew?

JR Oh, yes, and he dealed wi' him wi' his hands. Johnie caudnae help havin' the hurt in his hairt no more than his nephew havin' to dee, you see. So he returned back what he did to him.

HG Your last stanza is particularly forceful

Johnie he broke his back in three,
And he broke his collar bone
And he tied him on his grey mare's back
For to carry the tidin's home.

This goes back, I believe, to the old days when a horse would go home on its own.

JR Aye, any horse'll gae hame.

HG Then presumably the body of the nephew was returned to the auld wife, who was actually Johnie's mother and the nephew's grandmother.

JR When Johnie tied the nephew's body on the horse's back, Johnie knew his horse wad go back till his own home and the minute his mother saw her grandson killed and tied on the horse's back, she knew her son Johnie was lyin' killed in the woods somewhere. And she had said 'Tae the greenwids dinnae gang, gang . . .'

HG We presume then that Johnie died soon after?

JR The wounds on his thee wadnae killed 'im, but it was the wound on his hairt. The sang says:

And the next arrow they fired at him—

That was the one that was deadly—

His hairt's bluid blint his ee.

That must have meant that the arrow gied through his hairt and the blood gushed into his ee.

HG This ballad tells a story in a very realistic way—very straight. On the other hand the listener sometimes has to infer what the truth of it is, and the moral behind the story, because the song doesn't come out and say them directly. Do you think this kind of ballad is going out? Are many of the younger people singing ballads of this kind?

JR No, I don't think so. Not a lot of the young people learns it. I haven't heerd any o' them ever singin' that kind o' ballad.

HG This ballad interests me a great deal. It was Professor Child who said that 'Johnie Cocke' was 'a precious specimen of the ballad tradition.' I had never heard it sung till I heard you sing it about fifteen years ago. Where did you tell me you learned it?
JR Well, my mother had learned me the ballad. But she wasnae the only one at that time that knew it. And then it mentions Monymusk. Every summer we was brought up round aboot Monymusk and we connected Johnie wi' the place.
HG In your lifetime has there been much deer in that area?
JR Oh, yes. There're deer a' through the country still if you gae to the right places, especially in the back glens.
HG There's another ballad—'My Son David'—that you are often asked to sing, and in your version David says:—

O I'm gang awa' in a bottomless boat
And I'll never return again. . . .

Now exactly what do you think he meant when he told his mother that?
JR Well, it's very plain to be seen what he meant. If he was gang awa' in a bottomless boat—well, he was gang to droon himsel'. He wad never come back. He was gang to destroy his ain sel'.
HG And what do you think the two brothers fell out about?
JR The thing was that David was oldest and he was heir to everything, and the other brother was a very selfish, jealous brother. He wanted for nothin', he had everything too. But he didnae want that. He wanted to be the master, you see, o' the castle or fat ever it was. And he wanted to kill his brother and become master. So his mother likit David even better than fat she likit the other one. So when he tried to kill his brother, well, of course, it was a natural thing for David to fight to defend his sel'. So he killed his brother.
HG So this is a story of killing instead of being killed?
JR But David fought him a fair fight and killed him.
HG That explains your version.
JR We hadnae enough o' the ballad, actually, to tell the whole story.
HG Another one of yours that I seldom hear is 'The Bonnie Hoose o' Airlie'.
JR It's funny but my way o' havin' it is the same air as 'Loch Lomond'. The same air:

It fell on a day and a bonnie summer's day,
When the clans were awa' wi' Chairlie,
That there fell oot a great dispute
Between Argyll and Airlie.

That's the air that our people used to sing till it lang ago.
HG Now Airlie is in what part of Scotland?
JR It's in Perthshire, I believe. You see, Argyll kent that Lord Ogilvie was awa' wi' Prince Chairlie, and then he kent it were naebody there by Lady Ogilvie and their bairns. He once tried to coort Lady Ogilvie, but she wadnae hae 'im. You see, she took

Lord Ogilvie. So Argyll said he wad burn doon the castle, and he'd ne'er leave a standin' stane o' it. But he give her a chance to come doon and kiss 'im. To make up wi' 'im. And then she said till 'im:

I wadnae come doon, ye false Argyll,
Nor wad I kiss thee fairly.
I wadnae come doon, ye false Argyll,
Though ye dinnae leave a standin' stane o' Airlie.

She wadnae come doon if he burned baith her and her bairns.

If my guid lord was at hame,
As this nicht he's awa' wi' Chairlie—
For it's no Argyll and a' his men
That wad plunder the bonnie hoose o' Airlie.

HG Does anybody know why the Duke of Argyll didn't follow Charlie?
JR Well, no—I'm maybe good enough at history in my mind, but I caudnae jeest tell ye why he didnae. But the castle was burned and I cannae mind the last two verses that tell how Prince Charlie and them were comin' o'er the loch in the boat. They seed the reek comin' to Airlie and they kent whenever they seed it. Lord Ogilvie said it was his hoose that was on fire and he kent wha it was that did it—he had an idea—they got her and the bairns jeest there by theirsel' and the servants. I cannae mind the last two verses. I'll have to see if I can get somebody that can mind them. But it's a bonnie song.
HG I understand that you learned most of your songs from your mother and that she died only a year or so before Hamish Henderson came first to your door.
JR Aye, it was mostly at nicht, as I learned all my big ballads at nicht. My mother cudnae sleep as her two sons and her husband was oot in the First World War and she cudnae sleep because she was worried. And she used to set up till aboot two in the mornin'. Her and her brother used to sing the songs togither, and I used to listen, and I got interested in the ballads and the folksongs. I started to learn them at that time. The auld sangs went from mouth tae mouth in these days. They never learned them off of paper, that's certain. My people lived in the caravans and tents. Through the day they went oot sellin' their wares and their goods and at nicht after the supper they used to sit round the fires and we'd have a little sing-song or a bit o' music. They cud all play—bagpipes, fiddles, accordians, or mouth organs—and they cud all sing. I was askit to sing and of course I wud sing a few sangs what the people likit me to sing and it was the ballads that they askit. And some o' the older people wud sing. And some o' the ones aboot my age that was very guid at the auld sangs. That's how we passed the time. I'm singin' a story when I sing a big ballad. And the most o' them is really history. When I'm singin' the song, to tell ye the God's truth, I picture it, jeest as if it was really happenin'. To me, the big ballads which I've keepen since a child an' has never forgotten, they'll always be to me a story as well as a song.