Notes on Collection and Research

'The Blacks on India's Shore'

ALAN BRUFORD

This song is printed here as a tribute to the singer, Peter Pratt from Toab in the East Mainland of Orkney, who celebrated his ninetieth birthday on 4 September last year. Peter is best known as a whistle player: his memory for tunes goes back farther than that of any instrumentalist now playing in Orkney, though he is still ready to pick up new tunes from the radio. He is beginning now to complain of shortness of breath, but his playing has not lost its sweetness. On my first visit to Peter in 1966 I happened to ask whether he knew any old songs, and—though he is not at all known as a singer—he sang me three in a very pleasant, steady voice: 'The American Stranger', 'The Painful Plough', and 'The Blacks on India's Shore', printed below. He learned this song from Maggie Esson, a Holm woman, when he was in his teens.

The theme of this song, the 'female soldier' (or sailor) who enlists as a man to avoid being parted from her lover, is common in English ballads. It seems to go back to the sixteenth century ('Mary Ambree'), but the variants best known recently, which name 'Lisbon' and 'The Banks of the Nile' as the battlegrounds, presumably date from the Napoleonic wars—when, considering the number of camp-followers who often accompanied British forces, the subterfuge would hardly have been necessary! 'The Blacks on India's Shore' seems on internal evidence to suggest the campaigns of Clive or Wellesley rather than the North-West Frontier, and may be a prototype for the Napoleonic variants, which it closely resembles in the dialogue. The mysterious 'prologue' of verse 6 might be a clue for dating, but it is difficult to suggest what piece of equipment it might represent: 'firelock' seems unduly antiquated. The text has little trace of dialect, like many songs collected in Orkney, and might well derive ultimately from a broadsheet.

The direct leap of a minor seventh at the beginning of the tune is unusual: even in instrumental music, where such leaps in a Dorian tune can be found (*e.g.* in 'Hopetoun House', alias 'Sweet Molly') they are usually led up to by a shorter leap. Otherwise it is a fairly typical 'come-all-ye' tune. Peter Pratt sang it in very regular triple time: it is tempting to see this as the rendering of a singer who is primarily an instrumentalist, but in my experience most Orkney singers prefer a very steady beat.

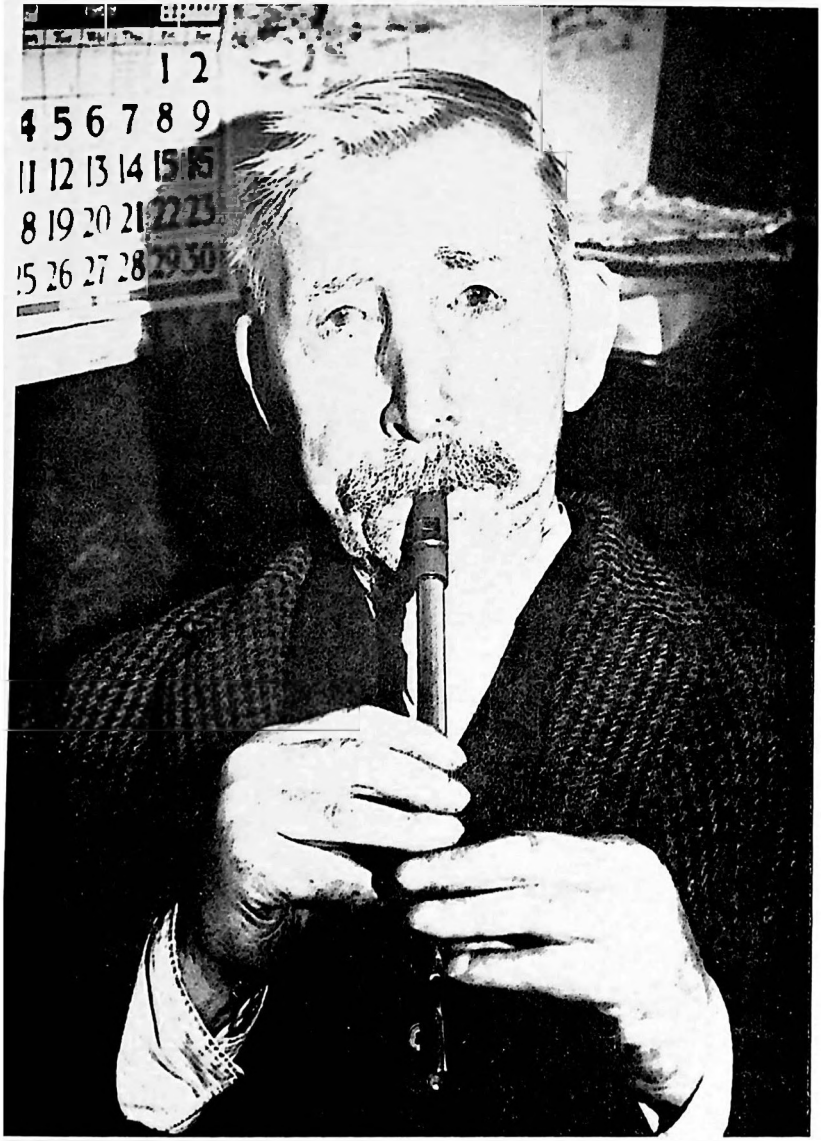


PLATE II Peter Pratt, Orkney whistle-player.
(Photograph by Ernest Marwick, September 1969)

The Blacks on India's Shore

Come all you tender lovers, a tale I will unfold:
It's of an undaunted female and a gallant soldier bold:
Young Mary was a braw lass, so virtuous and so kind;
Young Willie was as brave a lad as ever crossed the Line.

Long time this couple had courted—their parents did not know—
Until the wars of India young Willie had to go:
'To fight for England's glory and the lass I do adore
I must leave my father's dwelling for the blacks on India's shore.'

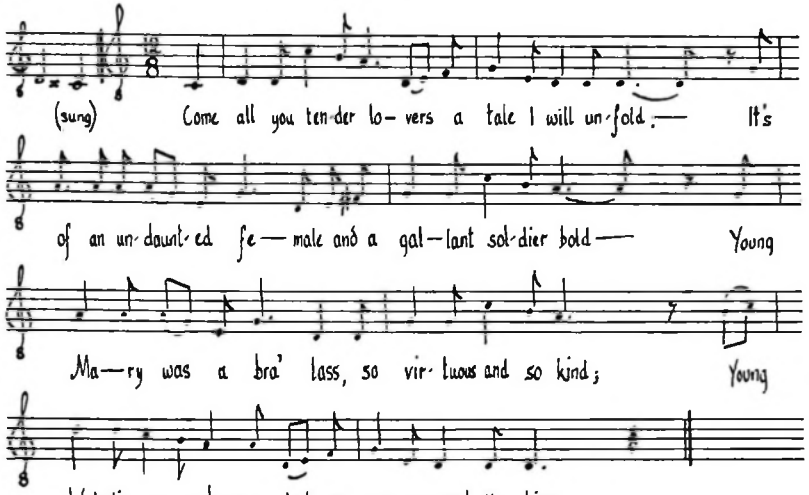
Poor Mary fell a-weeping; the tears ran from her eyes.
Willie clasped her to his bosom for to hide her sobs and sighs:
A watch and ring he's gi'en to her, his jewels, his only store,
Saying: 'Take thee this as a pledge of love till I return on shore.'

Poor Mary still being weeping, she fell in deep despair,
Saying: 'I will go along with you where the big cannons roar:
To fight for England's glory and the lad I do adore
I must leave my father's dwelling for the blacks on India's shore.'

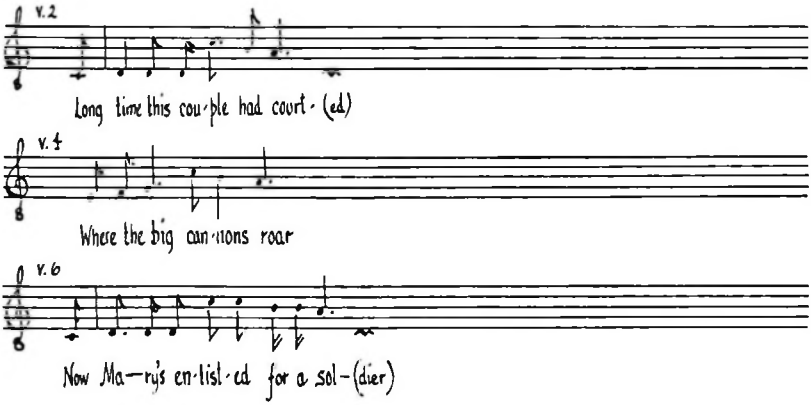
'Oh hold your tongue, sweet Mary, you could not lend a hand:
As for your little feet, my dear, in battle could not stand.
Alas, your tender body some deadly wound might sore:
You could not face your enemy, the blacks on India's shore.'

Now Mary's enlisted for a soldier, a prologue by her side,
Yet ne'er a one suspected that e'er she was a maid:
She fought her way through fire and smoke, and never yet gave o'er
Till she had faced her enemy, the blacks on India's shore.

A great reward sweet Mary got, she did behave so brave.
Young Willie serving out his time a pension did receive.
So now this couple's got married and have gold in great store,
And they bless the day they sailed away for the blacks on India's shore.



Main variants:



'The Parson's Sheep'

ALAN BRUFORD

AT 1735A, *The Bribed Boy Sings the Wrong Song*, has only fairly recently been recognised as an international folktale type. It was first given this number by Boggs in his catalogue of Spanish folktales (1930:144) and AT now also reports one or two versions from Denmark, Italy, Yugoslavia and the West Indies as well as those from the United States and England. Probably more versions will be reported now that the type has been established, but it is already clear that it is remarkably mobile for a type of this sort, which centres on a song whose words must be translated into a metrical form.

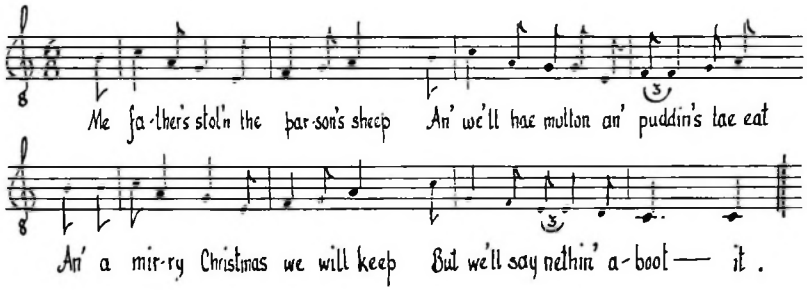
In English, Baughman (1966) lists five American versions (two from Negroes, one of them as an animal fable, besides one in Spanish) and one from England (Addy 1895: 18, from Derbyshire). Like the placing of the lists—two lists, not identical, under AT 1735C and motif K1631, without cross-reference—the proportions are typical of Baughman's catalogue, and need not be taken as representing the true state of affairs (*cf. Scottish Studies* 13:180–4). This note is designed at least to begin an entry for Scotland.

The version of the story which follows (SA 1969/154 A2) was recorded on 20 December 1969 from Gilbert Voy (aged 75) a native of Inganess in the East Mainland of Orkney, who has spent fifty years in the Glasgow area without losing his characteristic East Mainland accent. His father used to tell the story and sing the song at weddings before the turn of the century—'much to the disgust of my mother, who hated it'. The words of the story here are clearly a studied version for public performance: Gilbert himself recorded it for a limited circulation gramophone record thirty years ago, but he has a first-rate verbal memory, and there is no reason to doubt that he tells the story in his father's own words.

Away back in the old days in Orkney there were some gey pitiful times. Jimmock o' Tissiebist, wi' a scrythe o' peerie bairns, were warse off than maist: wi' the sheep a' deein', and the tatties a failure, things at Tissiebist wisna lookin' ower bright for Christmas. Whatever wyes or no, one blashie dark night, Jimmock was away a while, and twa-three days efter, an uncan yowe was seen aboot the hoose. Some of the bairns surely kent the yowe, for one day when ane of them was oot herdin' the kye, he was singin' to himsel' aboot it, something like this:

[1] 'Me father's stol'n the parson's sheep
An' we'll hae mutton an' puddin's tae eat,
An' a mirry Christmas we will keep,
But we'll say nethin' aboot it.

[2] 'For if the parson gets tae know,
It's ower the seas we'll have tae go,
And there we'll suffer grief an' woe
Because we stole fae the parson.'



Well, up jumps the parson fae the other side o' a faelie dyke, and he says tae the boy: 'Boy, look here, if you'll come to the church on the Sabbath and sing that same song, I'll gie thee a suit o' claes and half a croon.'

So, on the Sunday mornin' service, efter the minister had read a psalm and said a prayer, he stood up and he said in an a'ful lood voice: 'I hev the following intimation to make. Stand up, boy, and sing that same song as I heard you singin', herdin' the kye.'

But the peerie boy hed mair wit than that. This is what he sang:

[3] 'As I was walkin' oot one day
I spied the parson very gay:
He was tossin' Molly in the hay—
He turned her upside down, sir.

[4] 'A suit o' claes and half a croon
Was given tae me be Parson Broon
Tae tell the neighbours all aroon'
What he hed done tae Molly!'

I had already recorded the song in June (SA 1969/44 B5), with an outline of the story, from Mrs Violet Manson (*née* Harvey, aged 67) who has lived nearly all her life in Sandwick parish in the West Mainland of Orkney. She had heard it from her mother, who had a fund of songs and anecdotes, sad and gay. Here is her song for comparison, with a few words which seem to come from a polished version of the story:

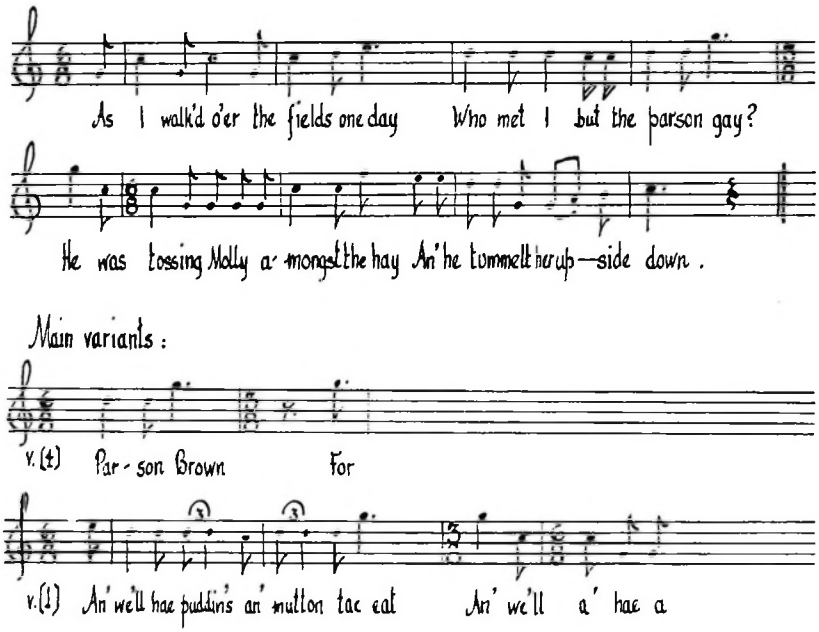
Well, the boy went to the church, and the minister said it was a boy in this congregation either going to say or sing a song disgraceful to be heard in any congregation. 'I say: Boy, go on.'

[3] 'As I walked o'er the fields one day
Who met I but the parson gay?
He was tossing Molly amongst the hay
An' he tummelt her upside down.

[4] 'A suit of clothes and half a crown
Were given to me by Parson Brown
For telling all the people round
What the parson did unto Molly!'

And what he *should* have sung was:

[1] 'My father stole the parson's sheep
And we'll hae puddin's and mutton tae eat,
And we'll a' hae a merry Christmas tae keep,
But we man say naethin' aboot it.'

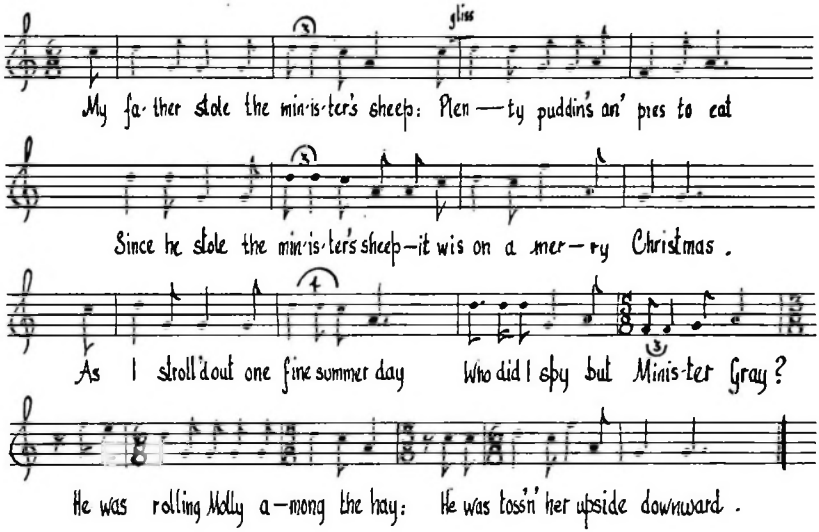


The archives of the School of Scottish Studies also contain one mainland Scottish version (SA 1954/91 A1) recorded by Hamish Henderson from Jeannie Robertson, who needs no further introduction to readers of this journal. Her whole story deserves to be published, but for the moment we only give the song. She tells the tale more fully than Gilbert Voy, making it clear that the boy demanded payment in advance—in Addy's

version the boy's very reasonable excuse is that he has no clothes good enough to go to church in—and that he actually saw the minister with Molly: most versions seem to leave it to the hearer to decide whether this is truth or a credible calumny, and, judging by the summaries in Boggs and AT, the Spanish version and probably others make the boy's father teach him the second song ('The priest has lain with my mother').

[1] 'My father stole the minister's sheep:
Plenty puddin's and pies to eat
Since he stole the minister's sheep—
It wis on a merry Christmas.'

[3] 'As I stroll'd out one fine summer day
Who did I spy but Minister Gray?
He was rolling Molly among the hay:
He was toss'n' her upside downward.'



Jeannie's tune is a variant of 'The Haughs of Cromdale', adapted to the same simple jig rhythm as the others. 'Minister Gray' is named, of course, for the rhyme, like the 'Parson Brown' of the Orcadian versions: she does not have the half-crown with which he rhymes, and in fact the fee is up-dated to two pounds. 'It wis on a merry Christmas' may also be noted: it may be corrupted from 'we's a' hae . . .' or the like, but if not it reinforces the connection with Mak the sheep-stealer of the Wakefield Second Shepherds' play and the story of the sheep rocked in the cradle, which Boggs catalogues next to this one and apparently found as part of the same printed *ejemplo*.

The likenesses of our three versions, however, are more noticeable than their differences. Molly appears in all of them, though not in Addy's English version. The first verse, on the other hand, is very close to Addy's:

[1] 'My father's stolen the parson's sheep,
And a merry Christmas we shall keep,
We shall have both pudding and meat,
But you moant say nought about it.'

The similar texts and quite different tunes might be taken to indicate that the story was spread on a broadside, whose sellers or buyers would fit their own tune to it. On the other hand they may indicate nothing more than oral transmission through storytellers who were not very good singers but had a good memory for verse.

It is possible, though perhaps not fashionable, to make some deductions where this written or oral version came from. The names of 'Molly' and 'the parson'—for whom Jeannie's 'minister' is a metrically inferior substitute—suggest an English source, as do the frequent standard English forms amongst dialect in the verses, though in a Scots and especially an Orcadian folk-song context none of these can be taken as really decisive. The date of the original is easier to determine: Gilbert Voy's verse 2, whether part of the archetype or an Orcadian accretion, clearly implies that the penalty for sheep-stealing will be transportation: this must have been composed before 1853, when transportation for convicts ceased. It seems fair to suggest that the story took shape in Britain in the eighteenth or early nineteenth century.

This is confirmed by a piece of evidence for which I am indebted to my colleague Mr Hamish Henderson. The story exists also in the form of a ballad, 'The Parson's Fat Wedder', which is in Peter Buchan's *Secret Songs of Silence* (Harvard MS 25241.9*, 1832), p. 166, but has also been collected by Mr Henderson from oral tradition. There is no connection between the words of the boy's song as given in the ballad and in the modern story, and I would be inclined to see this as a ballad deliberately made out of a folktale, like 'Thrummy Cap' or 'The Turkey Factor' (*Scottish Studies* 13:180). However, it may have been an older form of the story than ours, for the accusation is the international one that the parson—who is also called both minister and priest—had lain with the boy's mother. The whole scheme seems to be the boy's own device. At any rate we have proof that the story was known in one form, if not two, in Scotland before 1850.

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