Jeannie Robertson: The 'Other' Ballads

HERSCHEL GOWER & JAMES PORTER

Most collectors agree that the traditional folksinger will offer them more 'Other' ballads than those bearing a number assigned by Professor Child. Such is the case with Jeannie Robertson, whose non-Child ballads and songs far outnumber the Child group.* Frequently she will refer to a song as 'one of my big ballads', a category she reserves for any ballad which tells a serious or tragic story and which is sung in slow tempo and solemn style. Thus 'Lord Randal' and 'The Butcher Boy' are both 'big ballads'.

The following selection of ten non-Child ballads helps to characterise Jeannie's total repertoire and to call attention to the variety still to be found in Scottish folksong. All ten deserve to be called popular ballads in the most literal sense, no matter what their origins or aesthetic merits. Some are clearly from English broadsides of the nineteenth century ('The Butcher Boy' and 'The Handsome Cabin Boy') and have received a fair amount of scholarly attention as 'later' ballads. Like many of the Child ballads, the narratives in this group have become international in circulation and popularity. Some have been collected in England, Ireland, Nova Scotia, and Australia. One could compare, for example, Jeannie's version of 'The Bold Lieutenant' with the version sung by Jenny L. Combs of Berea, Kentucky (in Cecil Sharp, *English Folksongs from the Southern Appalachians* I, p. 396). One can confidently conclude that most of these songs are still very popular in many areas and are part of the folksong legacy of the nineteenth century to the twentieth.

The obviously Scottish and localised ballads which Jeannie sings have not yet received the scholarly attention they deserve. Although some were collected by Gavin Greig and discussed in a brief way in *Folksong of the North-East*, there is as yet no proper index or classification of the hundreds of Scottish ballads unknown to or rejected by Professor Child. That is, there is a great need in Scotland for works like Malcolm Laws's *Native American Balladry* and *American Balladry from British Broadsides*, in which the songs are grouped and numbered for easy, systematic reference.

Jeannie's North-East or localised ballads like 'The Laird o the Denty Doon-By' or 'Haud Your Tongue, dear Sally' or 'Davie Faa' obviously reflect the continuing vitality of the ballad tradition and fall upon the modern ear with a fresh, pronounced appeal. In most cases the textual deficiences tend to be compensated for by excellent tunes and Jeannie's extraordinary gifts as a singer.

The last example, 'The Hobo Song', was published in 1930 as 'Hobo Bill's Last Ride'

* For 'Jeannie Robertson: The Child Ballads' see *Scottish Studies* 14:35

and is representative of the 'outside' or 'impure' strain in the repertoires of many modern Scottish singers. Although when questioned, Jeannie replied that she learned the words and music from 'somebody who'd spent all their life in Scotland', this version hardly disguises its printed and phonographic origins. W. L. O'Neal was credited with words and music when the song was copyrighted in 1930 by Peer International Corporation in America. The late Jimmie Rodgers, American country singer, recorded the song and included it in *Jimmie Rodgers Album of Songs*, Southern Music Publishing Company, New York, 1943. (The Rodgers recording was made on 13 November 1929 and can be heard on the RCA Victor re-issue LPM–1640 as 'Hobo Bill's Last Ride'.)

Thus the group as a whole characterises those tastes and attitudes in the Scottish tradition that go beyond Child; it illustrates the ballad process of flowering on the one hand and decline on the other, and it shows the linguistic versatility of a major Scottish singer.

HERSCHEL GOWER

Notes on the Tunes

An examination of Jeannie Robertson's repertoire reveals one important fact: that is, the pentatonic or near-pentatonic nature of the great majority of the tunes. Often the basic, 'pure' pentatonic mode is affected by the addition of decorative, passing, or leaning notes introduced from the so-called 'gaps' in such a mode. Where these notes are isolated or infrequent, the general solidity of the pentatonic structure is barely disturbed (*e.g.* 'Lord Randal').

A typological question that arises in the classification of tunes must therefore be discussed at this point, and that is the influential character of ornamentation upon the mode. In some tunes ('Lord Randal', 'The Gypsy Laddie', 'Jimmy Drummond', 'The Banks o Red Roses') degrees are introduced as brief ornaments, and it is clear that interpretation of the mode cannot entirely disregard these, since they are *de facto* present.

There are alternative positions open to the musicologist: either, to view all notes that appear in the tune as integral to its final classification; or, to reject decorative notes whose fleeting appearance is of minor consequence in determining a tune's morphology. Bertrand Bronson has already encountered this problem on those occasions where there is dubiety about the essential function of passing notes in his abstracted versions of the tunes. He inserts, for example, 'pentatonic in feeling' after an authentic Ionian/Mixolydian classification (vol. II of 'The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads', p. 438), or again (vol. II, p. 420) after an Ionian tune of mixed range, 'but virtually I/M' (this latter a hexatonic example).

The former of these positions might be adopted by the scholar whose primary interest is the organic reality of the song in performance. The latter theoretical standpoint would perhaps represent the school which bases its method on broad comparative lines, where much of the material consists of tunes from printed collections or simple musical transcriptions.

A third position suggests itself, however: this is one which weighs such factors as relative function and frequency of occurrence in order to determine whether these pull the mode decisively toward the more amplified modal forms, *i.e.* if the framework is pentatonic, towards the hexa- or hepta-forms, and if hexatonic, towards the heptatonic. By means of this empirical method in the definition of mode, detailed transcriptions from actual performances can be assigned a classification that avoids the purism of the first theory and the involuntary accumulation of historical or mechanical error of the other.

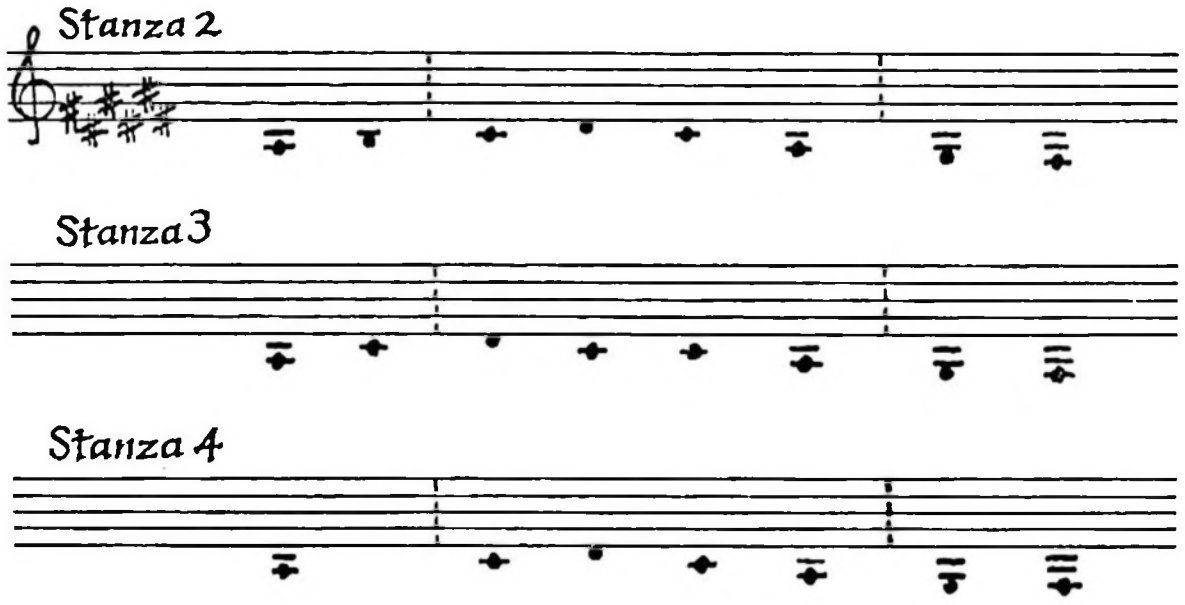
Thus, Jeannie's versions of 'Lord Randal' or the lyric 'The Banks o Red Roses' would be classified as pentatonic rather than heptatonic or hexatonic, since the ornamentation is so brief and isolated as to be inessential to the overall shape of the tune. On the other hand, hexatonic classification of 'The Bonnie Hoose o Airlie' is correct even though the fourth degree appears only once, in the third strain of the tune. The critical point is that this fourth degree has a functional importance as an accented passing note and must be seen as integral to the tune's morphology. The same reasoning can be applied to the tune of the lyric 'He's a Bonnie, Blue-eyed Laddie' with its prominent fourth in an otherwise strongly pentatonic melody. The lyrics 'What a Voice' and 'The Overgate' (Ricky do-dum-day refrain) are examples of the seventh degree fulfilling a similar functional role. In 'Lord Randal', 'The Gypsy Laddie', 'Jimmy Drummond' and 'The Banks o Red Roses' the introduction of extra notes does not, however, establish a complete hexa- or heptatonic structure because they are functionally of minor consequence.

There are cases where modality, moreover, may be ambiguous throughout the song: 'The Laird o the Denty Doon-by', for instance, cannot be rigidly classified because of the ambivalent third degree of the mode in all the stanzas. The low-pitched Mixolydian/Dorian ambience of 'Up a Wide and Lonely Glen' raises a different kind of ambiguity in the matter of the tonic, particularly in the first and second lines: a close relationship exists between the upper seventh, the fifth, and the lower tonic F. 'When I saw my own Bonnie Lass' is another ballad with problematic modality; in cases where an inflected seventh occurs, the version that appears to dominate should indicate the preferred classification, though there exist tunes where the two sevenths are equally functional. Both possibilities should be indicated. Here the cadential use of the flat seventh effectively calls for Mixolydian rather than Ionian modality. Again, functional importance assumes a critical role.

'The Butcher Boy' shares many characteristics of both cadence and contour with 'When I saw my own Bonnie Lass'. Both tunes have a prominent fourth as a cadential pivot, with later comparable contour patterns in the plagal range. 'The Butcher Boy' is indisputably Ionian, a fact arguably associated with its broadside origins.

The text of 'The Hobo Song' in Jeannie's version suffers from occasional lapses of memory, these occurring when unfamiliar phrases (*e.g.* 'boxcar door') or quasi-literary lines ('. . . No warm lights flickered around him') have been imperfectly remembered;

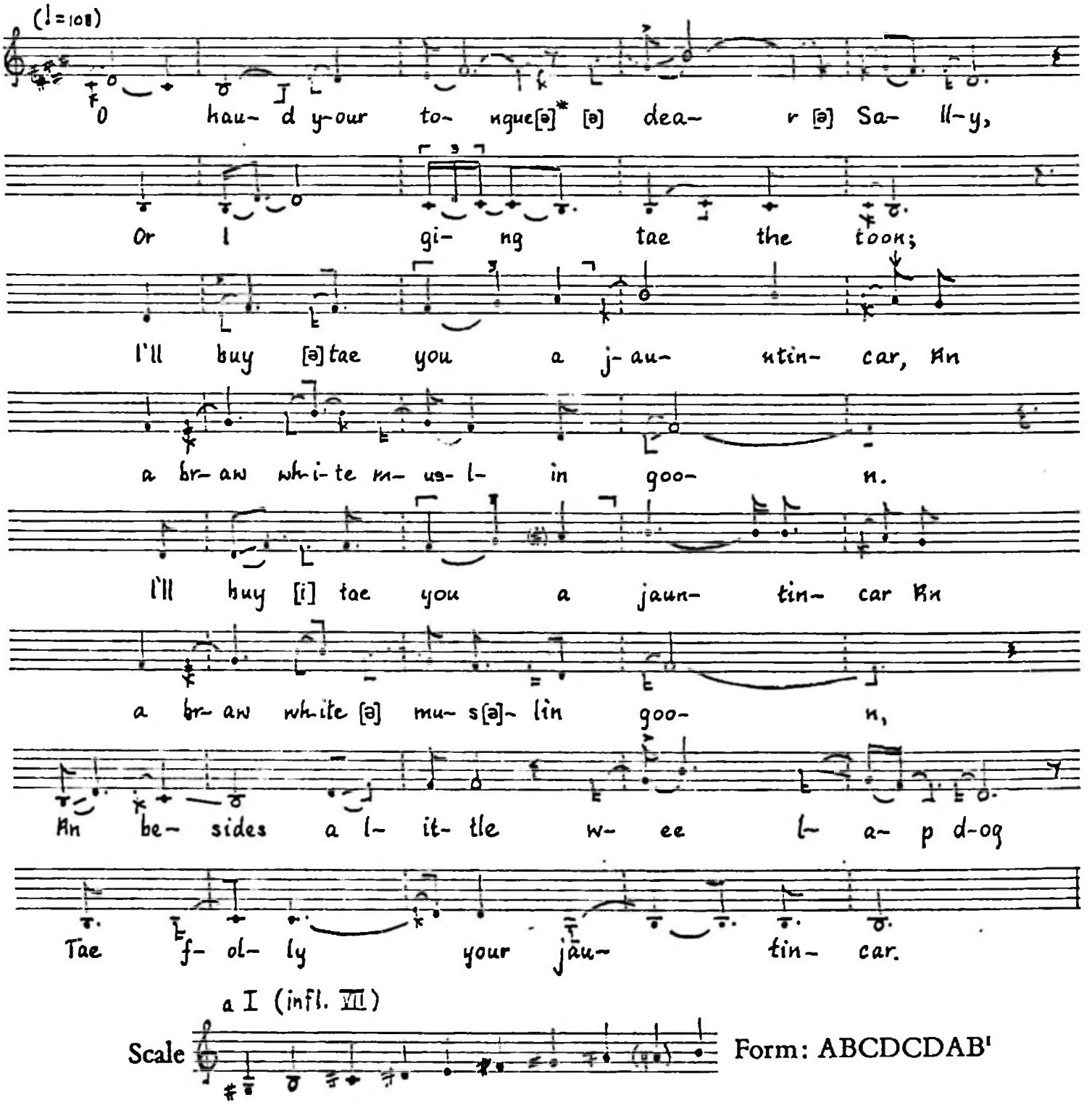
she also exchanges the second quatrains of stanzas 2 and 3. The contour and cadence alteration of the original tune, though, in line 5 of stanzas 2, 3 and 4 is accurately registered, suggesting a more potent retention of tune than of text:



Tunes and Verses

O HAUD YOUR TONGUE, DEAR SALLY

Collector: Hamish Henderson SA 1954/72



* A sound which is sung, but does not form part of a word, is represented in these transcriptions by a phonetic symbol.

O, haud your tongue, dear Sally,
Or I ging tae the toon;
I'll buy tae you a jauntin-car,
An a braw white muslin goon.
I'll buy tae you a jauntin-car
An a braw white muslin goon,
An besides a little wee lap dog
Tae folly your jauntin-car.

May the deil go wi your lap dog
An your jauntin-car and aa;
For I wad raither hae a young man
Tae roll me fae the waa.
I wad raither hae a young man
Withoot a penny ava
Before I'd hae a auld man
To roll me fae the waa.

For your chanter's never in order,
Your pipes is never in tune.
I wisht the deevil had you
And a young one in your room.
I wisht the deevil had you
And a young one in your room
As I wad raither hae a young man
To roll me fae the waa.

But now my auld man's deid an gone
But left tae me a gey fee.
He left to me ten thousand pounds,
Besides my lands quite free.
He left to me ten thousand pounds
Besides my lands quite free
And besides a little wee lap dog
To follow my jauntin-car.

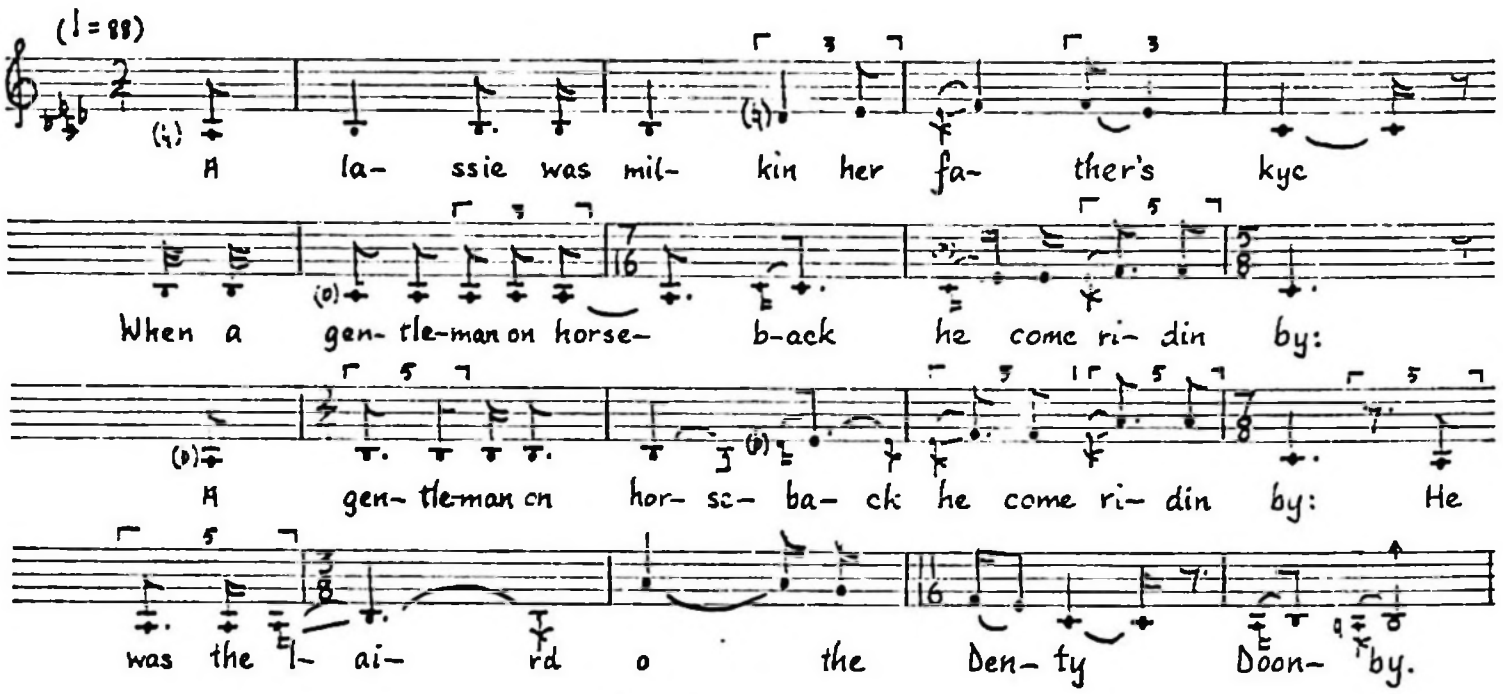
But now I've got a young man
Withoot a penny ava.
Now I've got a young man
Tae roll me fae the waa.
He broke my china cups and saucers,
He lay an broke them aa.
And he's killt my little wee lap dog
That follet my jauntin-car.

(JR 'I heard my mother singing it about thirty-six years ago.')*

* The comments which follow some of the songs are Jeannie Robertson's.

THE LAIRD O THE DENTY DOON-BY

Collector: Hamish Henderson SA 1952/33



a D [or a M] (infl. III, VII)

Scale  Form: ABCD

A lassie was milkin her father's kye
When a gentleman on horseback he come ridin by:
A gentleman on horseback he come ridin by:
He was the laird o the Denty Doon-by.

'O lassie, o lassie, what wad ye gie
If I were to lie aa nicht wi ye?'
'To lie ae nicht that'll never never be:
Suppose ye're laird o the Denty Doon-by.'

But he took her by the middle so sma.
He laid her doon whaur the grass grew lang.
It was a lang, lang time till he raised her up again:
Sayin, 'Ye're lady o'er the Denty Doon-by.'

It fell upon a day and a bonnie summer's day
To face the lassie's father some money had to pay:
To face the lassie's father some money had to pay:
To the laird o the Denty Doon-by.

'O good mornin, how dae ye do?
And hoo is your dochter Janety noo?
And hoo's your dochter Janety noo
Since I laid her in the Denty Doon-by?'

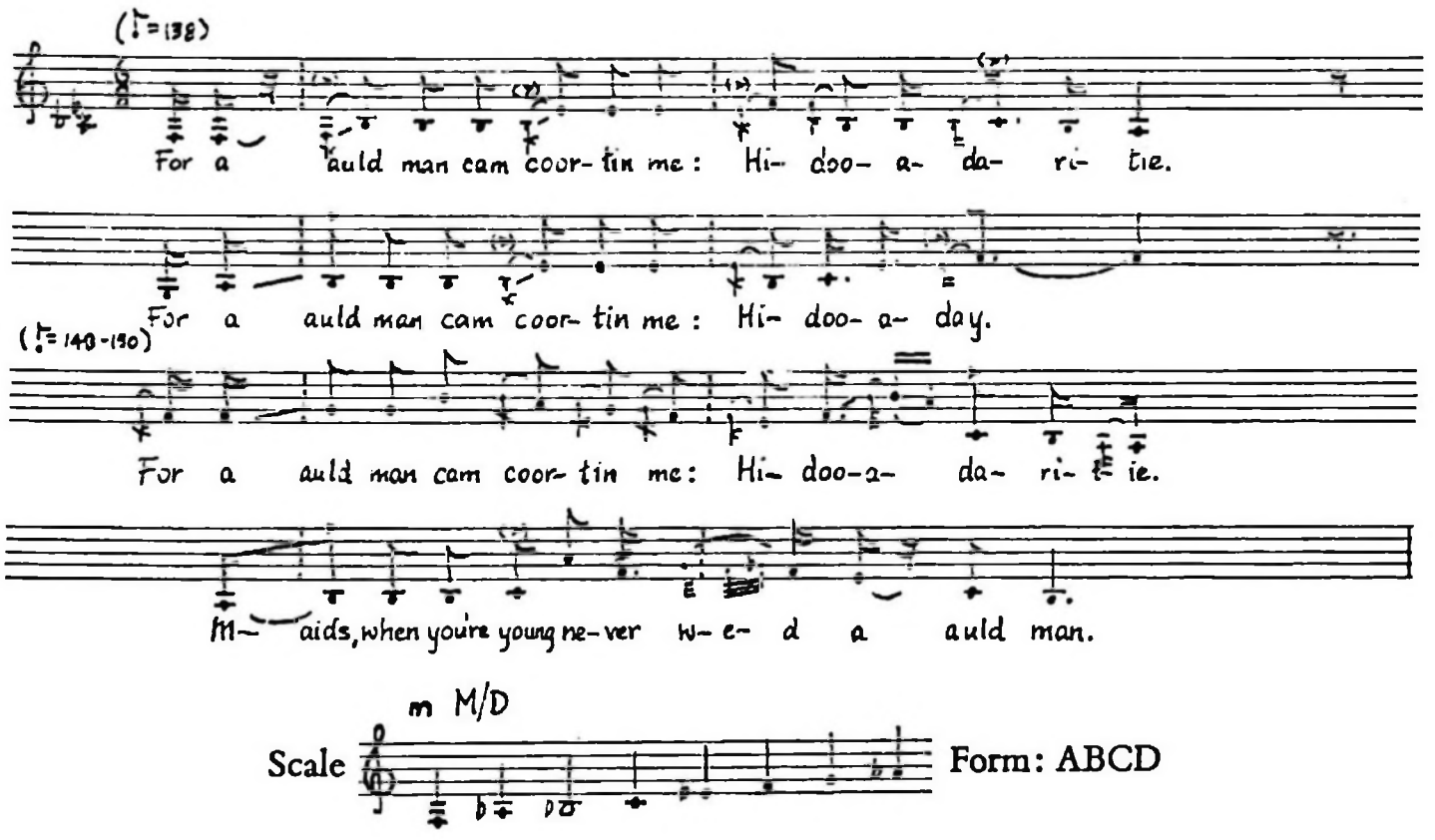
'O my wee Janet she's no very weel.
My dochter Janet she looks uncae pale.
My dochter Janet she cowks at her kail,'
Since I laid her in the Denty Doon-by.

But he took her by the lily-white hand;
He showed her roon his rooms, they were twenty-one.
He placed the keys intae her hands
Sayin, 'Ye're lady o'er the Denty Doon-by.'

'O,' says the auld man, 'what wull we dae?'
'O,' says the auld wife, 'we'll dance tae we dee.'
'O,' says the auld man, 'I think I'll dae that tee
Since she's made lady o'er the Denty Doon-by.'

A AULD MAN CAM COORTIN ME

Collector: Hamish Henderson SA 1952/43



For a auld man cam coortin me:
Hi-doo-a-daritie.
For a auld man cam coortin me:
Hi-doo-a-day.
For a auld man cam coortin me:
Hi-doo-a-daritie.
Maids, when you're young never wed a auld man.

For when we went to the church,
I left him in the lurch.
When we went to the church, me being young.
When we went to the church,
I left him in the lurch:
Maids, when you're young never wed a auld man.

When we went to wer tea,
He started teasing me.
When we went to wer tea, me being young.
When we went to wer tea
He started teasing me:
Maids, when you're young never wed a auld man.

When we went to wer bed,
He lay as he was dead.
When we went to wer bed, me being young.
When we went to wer bed,
He lay as he was dead:
Maids, when you're young never wed a auld man.

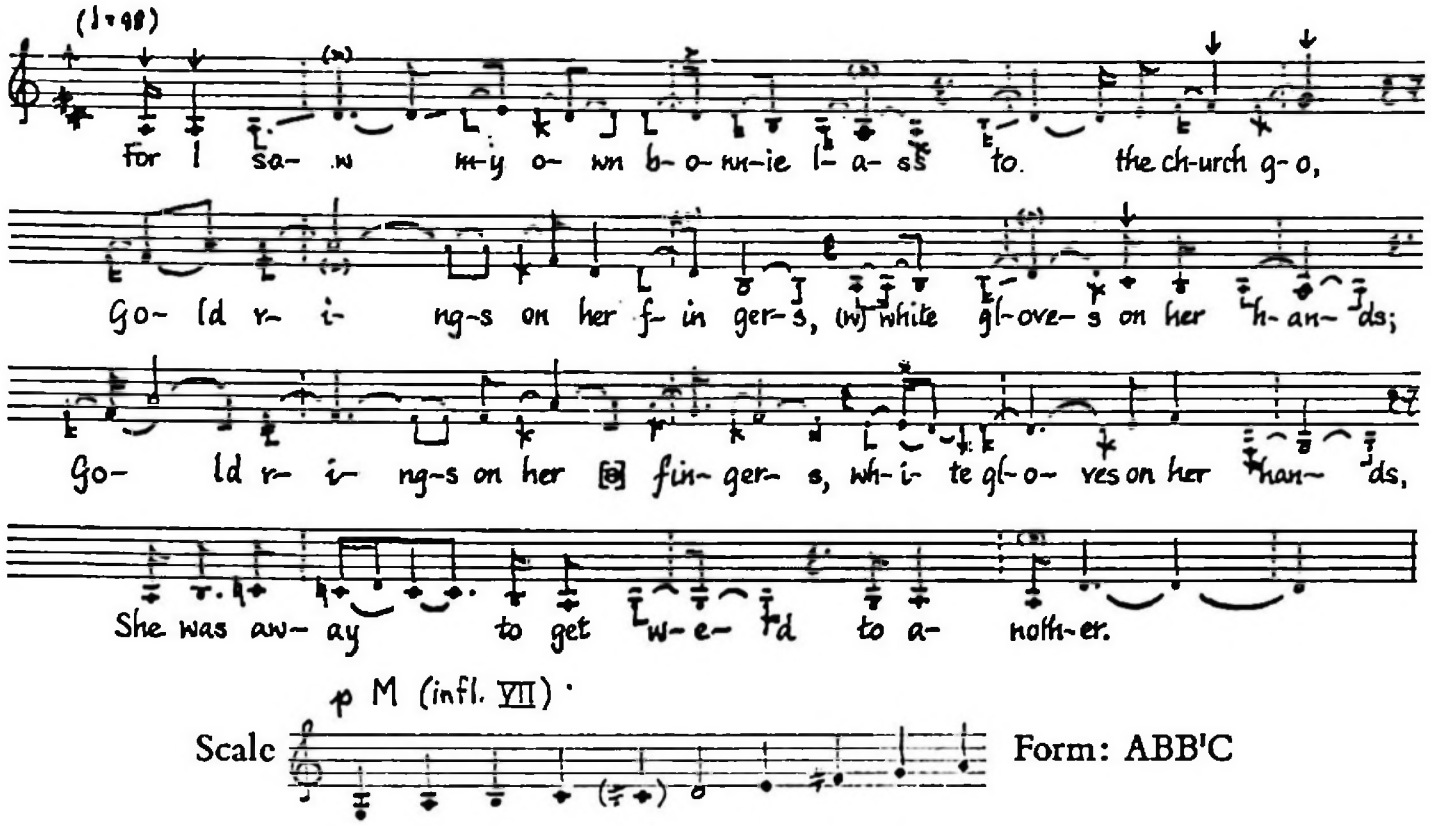
For he has no too-rool,
Or right fal-a-dooral, O.
He has no tooral, or right fa-la-day;
For he has no tooral
To fill up my dooral, O:
Maids, when you're young never wed a auld man.*

(JR 'I remember hearin a young man sing it when I was about twelve years of age. It was in—somewhere about the Deeside—I just can't remember very well.')

* For the 'courting song' tradition in America, with series similar to the above, see *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore* III:4–40.

WHEN I SAW MY BONNIE LASS

Collector: Hamish Henderson SA 1954/88



Scale Form: ABB'C

For I saw my own bonnie lass to the church go,
Gold rings on her fingers, white gloves on her hands;
Gold rings on her fingers, white gloves on her hands,
She was away to get wed to another.

I said my own bonnie lass wait a wee while
For you are false beguiled;
For you are false beguiled
But you're only my auld shoes when he's got you.

It was servin the glasses out of brandy and wine:
Here is health to the bonnie lass that should have been mine,
Here is health to the bonnie lass that should have been mine
But she's only my auld shoes when you've got her.

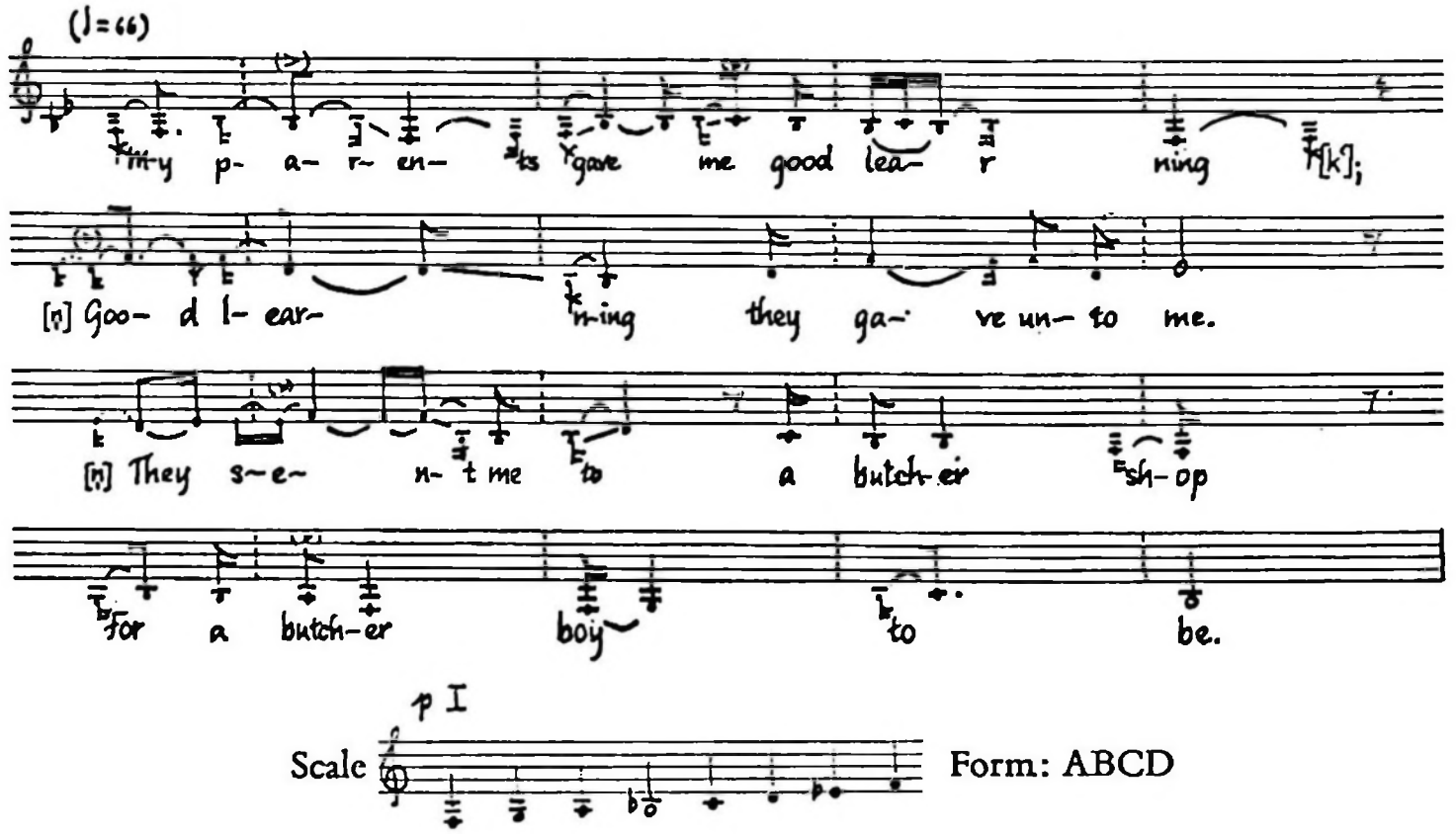
But the ladies and gents they inquired off of me:
How many blackberries grows roon a salt sea?
But I gave them one back with a tear in my e'e:
How many ships sail in a forest?

She has broken my hert and for ever left me;
She has broken my hert and for ever left me.
But it's not onc't or twice that she's lain now with me,
For she's there and she cannae deny it.

But I'll lay doon my heid and I'll tak a lang sleep;
Youse can cover me over by lilies so sweet.
Youse can cover me over by lilies so sweet,
For that's the only way I'll ever forget her.

THE BUTCHER BOY *or* THE WEXFORD GIRL

Collector: Hamish Henderson SA 1953/247



Scale Form: ABCD

My parents gave me good learning;
Good learning they gave unto me.
They sent me to a butcher shop
For a butcher boy to be.

It was there I met with a fair young maid
With dark and rolling eyes;
And I promised for to marry her
On the month of sweet July.

I went up to her mother's house
Between the hour of eight and nine,
And I asked her for to walk with me
Down by the foamin brine.

Down by the foamin brine we'll go,
Down by the foamin brine;
For that won' be a pleasant walk,
Down by the foamin brine.

But they walked it east and they walked it west,
And they walked it all alone,
Till he pulled a knife from out of his breast
And he stabbed her to the ground.

She fell upon her bended knee.
Help and mercy she did cry:
Roarin, 'Billy dear, don't murder me,
For I'm not prepared to die.'

But he took her by the lily-white hand
And he dragged her to the brim,
And with a mighty downwar' push
He pushed her body in.

But he went home till his own mother's house
Between the hour of twelve and one,
But little did his mother think
What her only son had done.

He asked her for a hankychief
To tie round his head;
And he asked her for a candlelight
To show him up to bed.

But no sleep, no rest, could this young man get;
No rest he could not find;
For he thought he saw the flames of Hell
Approachin his bedside.

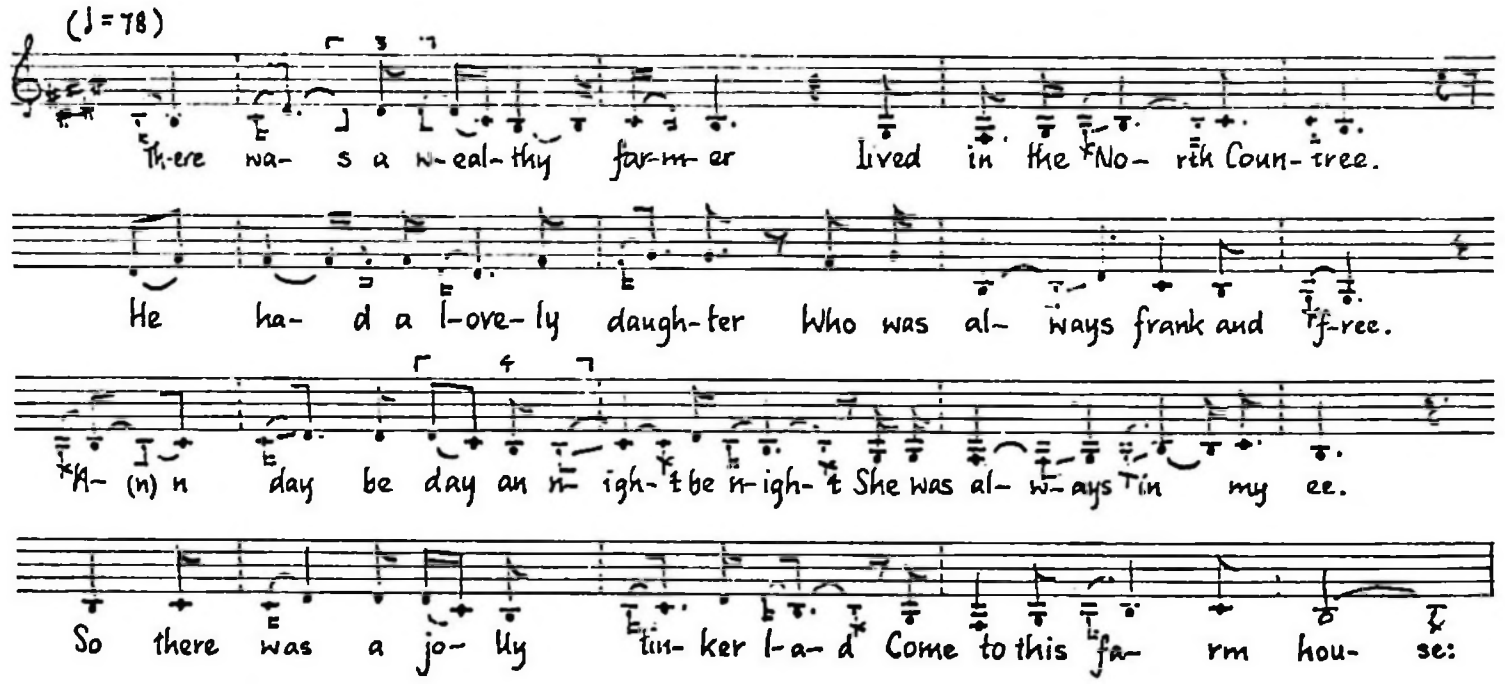
But the murder it was soon found out,
And the gallows was his doom,
For the murder of sweet Mary Anne
That lies where the roses bloom.*

(JR 'I learned it off an old friend, a woman, away about twenty-five or twenty-six years ago in Aberdeen.')

* In *Folk-Song of the North-East*, Number CXXXVII, Gavin Greig says of 'The Butcher Boy': 'The folk-singer is fond of Tragedy. Ballads of Murder and Execution, in particular, are pretty numerous, although it must be allowed that, as far as our North-Eastern minstrelsy is concerned, they are mainly importations. They have likely enough been introduced through broadsides. "The Butcher Boy" is well known in our part of the country, judging from the records which we have got of both words and tune.' (For a longer discussion see Laws, *American Balladry From British Broadsides*, p. 267, and Ch. IV, *passim*.)

DAVIE FAA

Collector: Hamish Henderson SA 1953/247



Form: ABCDCDAB
[ABCDABAB stanza 1; ABCDAB stanza 6]

There was a wealthy farmer
Lived in the North Countree.
He had a lovely daughter
Who was always frank and free.
An day be day an night be night
She was always in my ee.
So there was a jolly tinker lad
Come to this farm house:

'It is have you any pots or pans
Or caunle sticks to mend?
Or have you any lodgins
For me a single man?'
The fairmer he thocht it nae hairm
The tinker for to keep,
And the lassie she thocht it nae hairm
The tinker's bed to mak.

But the tinker folliet after her
And he did bar the door.
He catched her by the middle smaa,
An he laid her on the floor.
He catched her by the middle smaa
And up against the waa,
And it was there he teen the wills o her
Before she won awa.

The bonnie lassie blushed
An O but she thocht shame:
'It's since you've teen the wills o me
Come tell tae me your name.'
He whispered in the lassie's ear,
'They ca' me Davie Faa,
And you'll min' upon this happy nicht
Amongst the pease straw.'

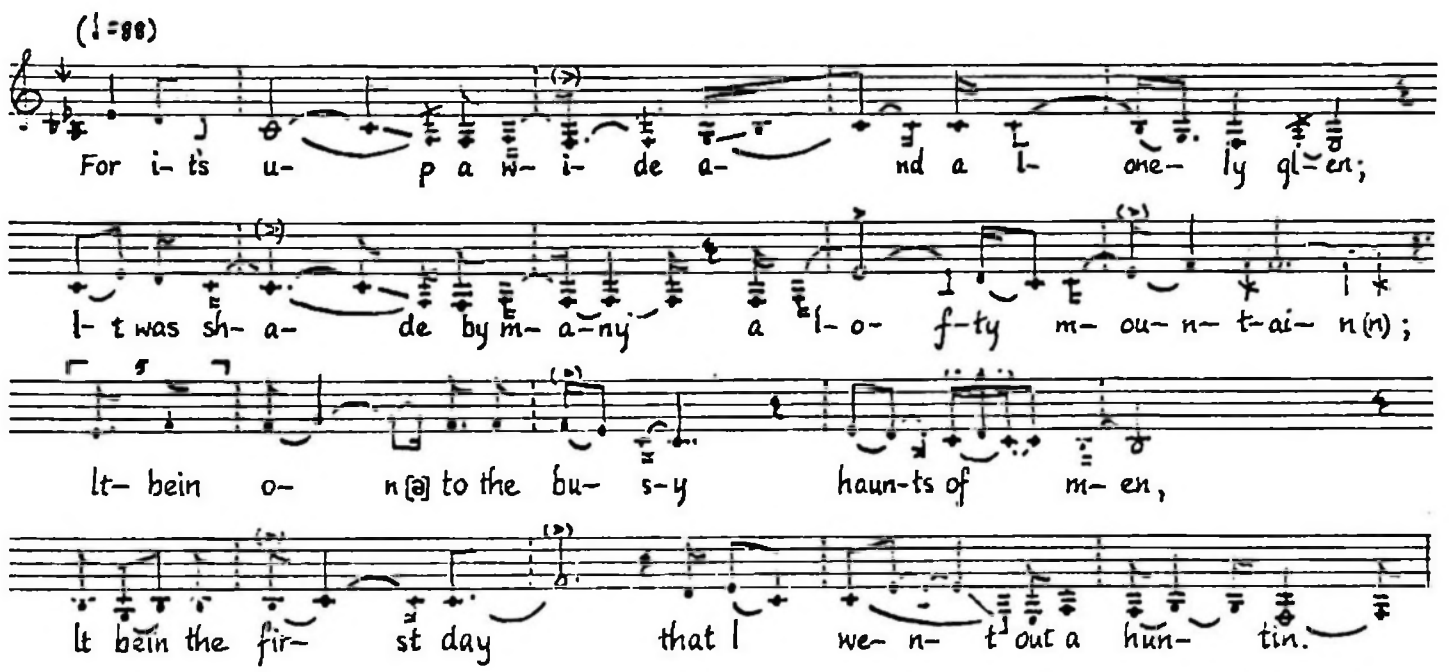
Six weeks had passed and gone;
This maid grew white an pale.
Nine month an better brought
Her forth a bonnie son.
'An since the baby's born
I will ca' him Davie Faa,
And I'll min' upon the happy nicht
Amongst the pease straw.'

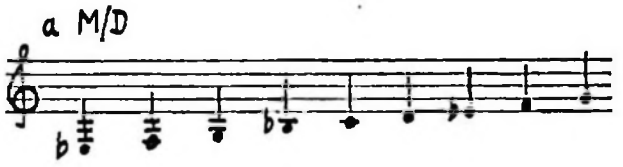
'For any man who weds my girl
For he'll get farms three.
For any man who weds my girl
For he'll get gol' quite free.
For although she's lost her maidenheid
O wheet the waur is she?'

(JR 'I heard my mother singin that away about thirty-five years ago.')

UP A WIDE AND LONELY GLEN

Collector: Hamish Henderson SA 1953/247



Scale  Form: AA¹BC

For it's up a wide and a lonely glen;
It was shade[d] by many a lofty mountain;
It bein on to the busy haunts of men,
It bein the first day that I went out a-huntin.

For it's been to me a happy day,
The day I spied my rovin fancy.
She was herdin her yowes oot-ower the knowes,
And in amongst the curlin heather.

For her coat was white, her goon was green,
Her body it bein long an slender;
Wi her cast-doon looks and her weel faurt face
It has off [oft] times made my heart to wander.

For it's I've been to balls where they were busked, ay an braw,
And it's I've been so far as Balquhidder,
And the bonniest lassie that e'er I saw
She was kilted and bare-fitted amongst the heather.

Says I, 'My lass, will you come wi me
And sleep wi me in a bed o feathers?
I'll gie ye silks and scarlets that will mak ye shine
And leave aa your mares amongst the heather.'

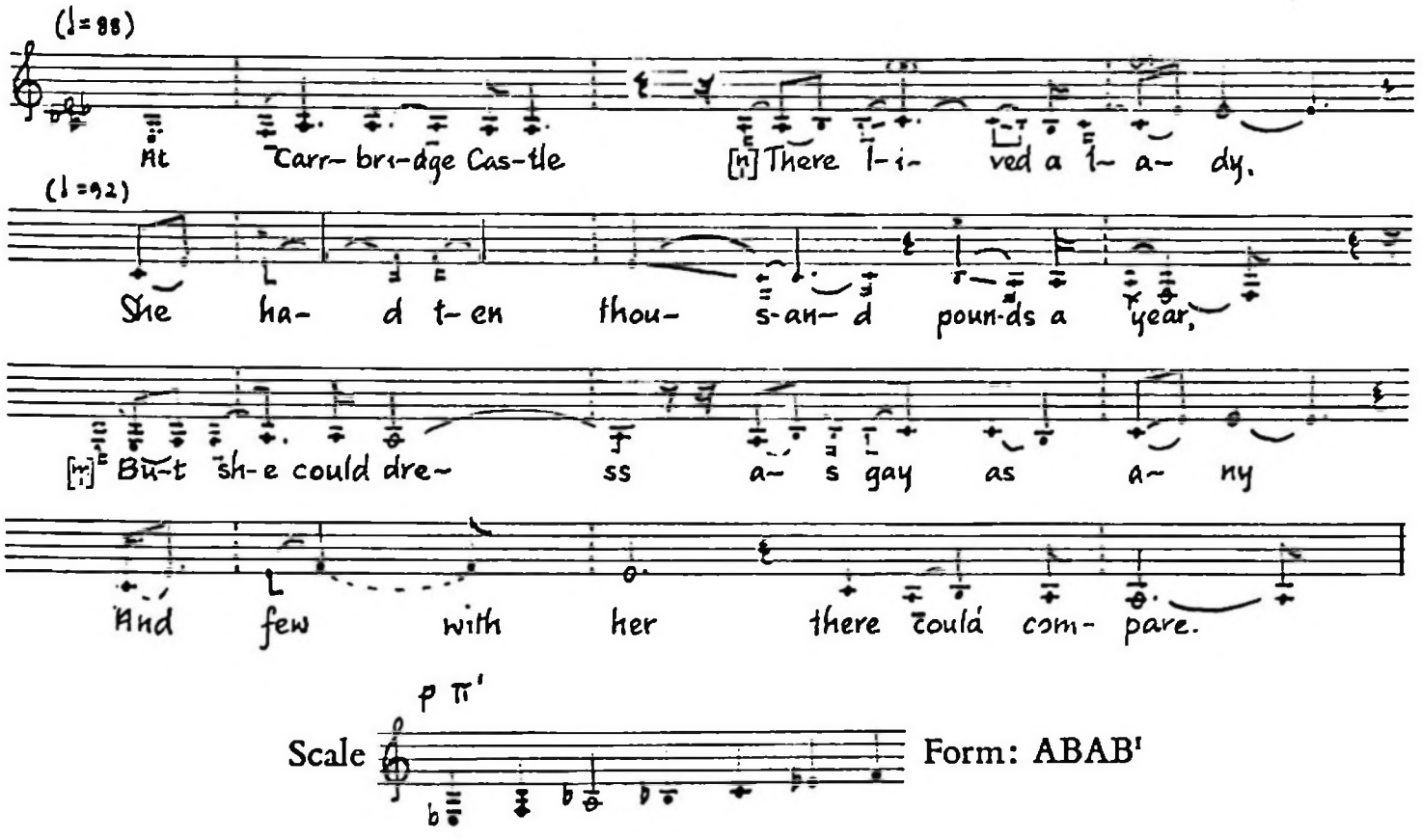
She said, 'My lad, you're very fair.
I really think your offer's sporting,
For it's you bein the son of a high squire man
And me but a poor humble shepherd's dochter.'

But it's her I socht and it's her I got
And its her I really intend to marry.
Fare you well, fare you well, to your heathery hills—
Fare you well, fare you well, my song it's ended.

(JR 'It was my mother that I heard singin it. My mother was born in Ballater . . . at Gairnside . . . Her name was Maria Stewart.')

THE BOLD LIEUTENANT *or* THE DEN OF LIONS

Collector: Hamish Henderson SA 1952/33



Scale Form: ABAB[1]

At Carrbridge Castle there lived a lady,
She had ten thousand pounds a year,
But she could dress as gay as any
And few with her there could compare.

But she was courted by two lovers
And both of them were brothers bold.
They were both alike in rank and station
They were both alike and she loved the two.*
They were both alike in rank and station
But what could she, a poor lady do?

She ordered her carriage to get ready,
All early by the break of day,
And a horse and saddle she did prepare
As quickly as she rode away.

When she came to the den of lions,
She dropped her fan in the lions' den:
'For any man who wants to gain a lady,
They will bring me back my fan again.'†

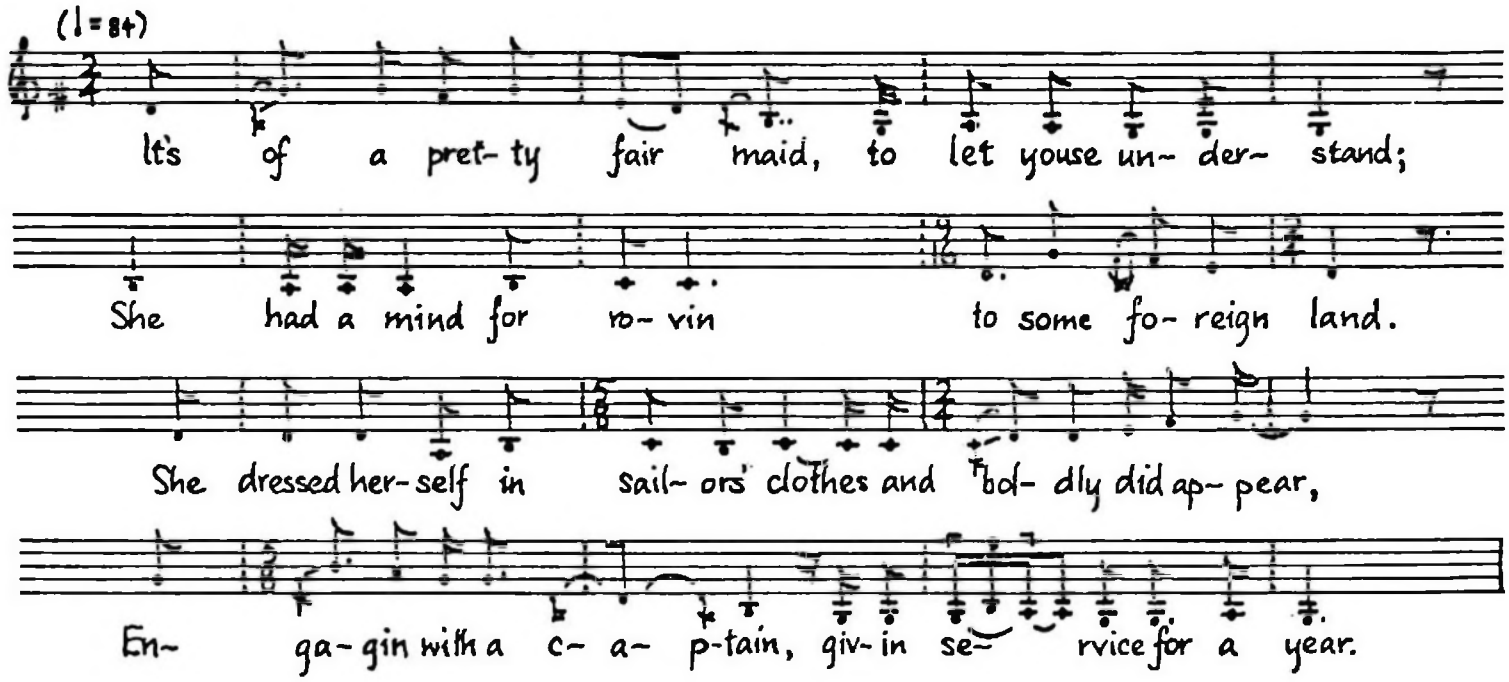
'Tis up spoke the bold sea captain;
He was bound to the *Tiger* of the many wars:
'For it's I have ventured my life in danger
On the many warships,*
But I will not venture my life in danger
For to gain a lady fair.'

But it's up spoke the poor lieutenant
And a bravely-spoking young man was he:
'For it's I will enter the den of lions
And I'll bring you back your fan again.'‡

* The tune for lines 3 and 4 is the same as for lines 1 and 2. † Lapse of memory after this verse.
‡ See Laws, *American Balladry from British Broadsides*, pp. 237–8, for notes on other versions.

THE HANDSOME CABIN BOY

Collector: Hamish Henderson SA 1952/33



Form: ABCD

It's of a pretty fair maid, to let youse understand;
She had a mind for rovin to some foreign land.
She dressed herself in sailors' clothes and boldly did appear,
Engagin with a captain, givin service for a year.

For the wind it bein' in favour and they soon set off to sea.
For the lady to the captain said, my love I wish you joy*
That we have engaged such a handsome cabin boy.

For his cheeks appeared like roses, and his side-locks they did curl.
And often-times the sailors smiled, and said he lookit like a girl.
But by eatin cabin biscuits his colours did destroy
And the wyne [wyme] did swell o pretty Bill, our handsome cabin boy.

O doctor, dear doctor, for the cabin boy did cry.
The sailors swore with all their might that the cabin-boy would die.
But the doctor run with all his might, he was smilin at the fun,
For to think a sailor lad would have a dochter or a son.

But when the sailors heard the joke, they aa begun to stare:
For the child belongs to none of us, aa solemn they did swear.
But the lady and the captain, they have oft-times kissed and toy'd,
So we'll soon find out the secret of our handsome cabin boy.

For they aa took up a bumper and they drunk success to trade:
It's twice unto this cabin boy, she's neither man nor maid.
But if this war should rise again, our sailors to destroy
And we'll ship some able seamen, same's our handsome cabin boy.

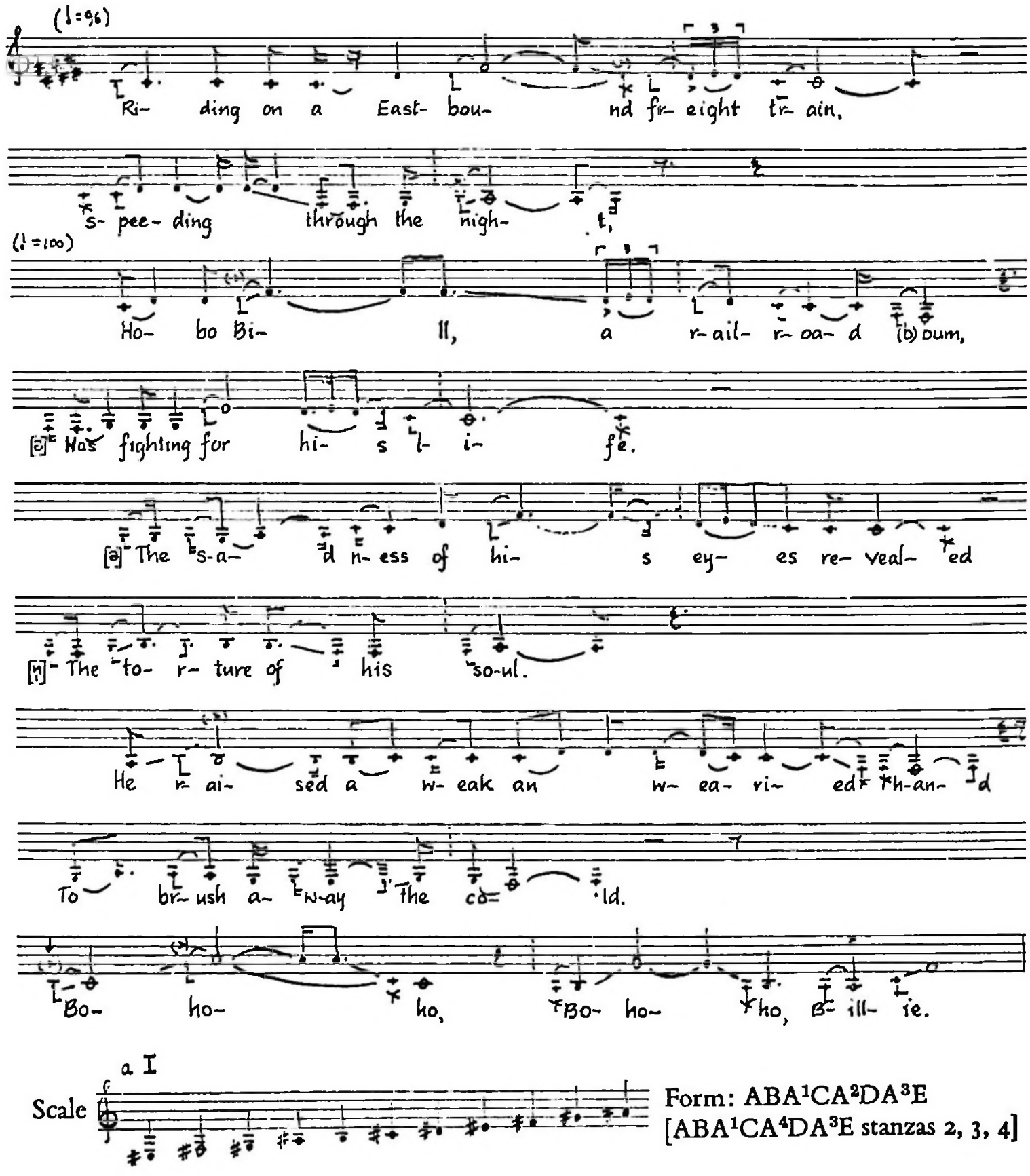
Through the Bay of Biscay our gallant ship did plough,
And that night the sailors they kicked up a bloomin row.
They took their bundles from their hammocks and the rest they did destroy,
And it was all through the groanin of our handsome cabin boy.†

(JR 'That was my mother's too.')

* Line 2 is sung here to the normal line 3 tune.
† See G. Malcolm Laws, Jr, *American Balladry from British Broadsides*, pp. 19, 209, for notes on other versions, British and American.

THE HOBO SONG

Collector: Hamish Henderson SA 1960/203



Scale

Form: ABA¹CA²DA³E
[ABA¹CA⁴DA³E stanzas 2, 3, 4]

Riding on a East-bound freight train,
Speeding through the night,
Hobo Bill, a railroad bum,
Was fighting for his life.
The sadness of his eyes revealed
The torture of his soul.
He raised a weak an wearied hand
To brush away the cold.

Refrain: Bo-ho-ho
Bo-ho-ho, Billie.

No wan li's flickerit roun' him,*
No blankets there to fold,
There was nothing but the howling wind
And the driving rain so cold
As the train sped through the darkness
An the raging storm outside.
No one knew that Hobo Bill
Was taking his last ride.

Refrain

Outside the rain was falling
On that lonely buskadoor†
But the little form of Hobo Bill
Lay still upon the floor.
When he heard that whistle blowing
In a dreamy kind of way
The hobo seemed contented
For he smiled there where he lay.

Refrain

It was early in the morning
When they raised the hobo's head.
The smile lingered on his face
But Hobo Bill was dead.
There was no mother's longing
To soothe his wearied soul,
For he was just a railroad bum
Who died out in the cold.

Refrain

(JR 'I learned it about thirty-seven or thirty-six years ago. I just heard it sung by several of the older ones and I liked it and learned it. It was just somebody 'd spent all their life in Scotland.')

* 'No warm lights flickered around him' (imperfectly remembered).
† 'box-car door'.