The Grey Selkie

ALAN BRUFORD

'The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry' [Child 113], being a supernatural ballad, 'should have followed No. 40 had I known of it earlier' (Child 1886:494). Not only the number but the title was unfortunate: other versions speak of the grey, not the great selkie, and 'silkie' with an *i* is a relatively rare form of the word for a seal which is normally 'selkie' or 'selch(ie)' throughout Scotland, including the Northern Isles.[1] But the one text known to Child (hereinafter, 'A') is exceptional in other ways. Though it may well represent the oldest extant form as well as being the first collected version of the ballad, it is also the shortest complete version and the only one to come from outside Orkney. It was collected by Lieut. (later Capt.) F. W. L. Thomas (1852), 'from the dictation of a venerable lady-udaller, who lived at Snarra Voe, a secluded district in [Unst,] Shetland', and 'sung to a tune sufficiently melancholy to express the surprise and sorrow of the deluded mother of the Phocine babe'.[2]

A

1 An eart'ly nourris sits and sings,
And aye she sings "Ba lily wean;
"Little ken I my bairnis father,
Far less the land that he staps in."

2 Then ane arose at her bed fit,
An' a grumly guest I'm sure was he;
"Here am I thy bairnis father,
Although that I be not comelie."

3 "I am a man upo' the lan',
An' I am a Silkie in the sea;
And when I'm far and far frae lan',
My dwelling is in Sule Skerrie."

4 "It was na weel," quo' the maiden fair,
"It was na weel, indeed," quo' she;
"That the Great Silkie of Sule Skerrie,
S'uld hae come and aught a bairn to me."

5 Now he has ta'en a purse of goud,
And he has pat it upo' her knee;
Sayin' "Gie to me, my little young son,
An' tak thee up thy nourris fee."

6 "An' it sall come to pass on a simmer's day,
Quhen the sin shines het on evera stane;
That I will take my little young son,
An' teach him for to swim the faem."

7 "An' thu sall marry a proud gunner,
An' a proud gunner I'm sure he'll be;
An' the very first schot that ere he schoots,
He'll schoot baith my young son and me."

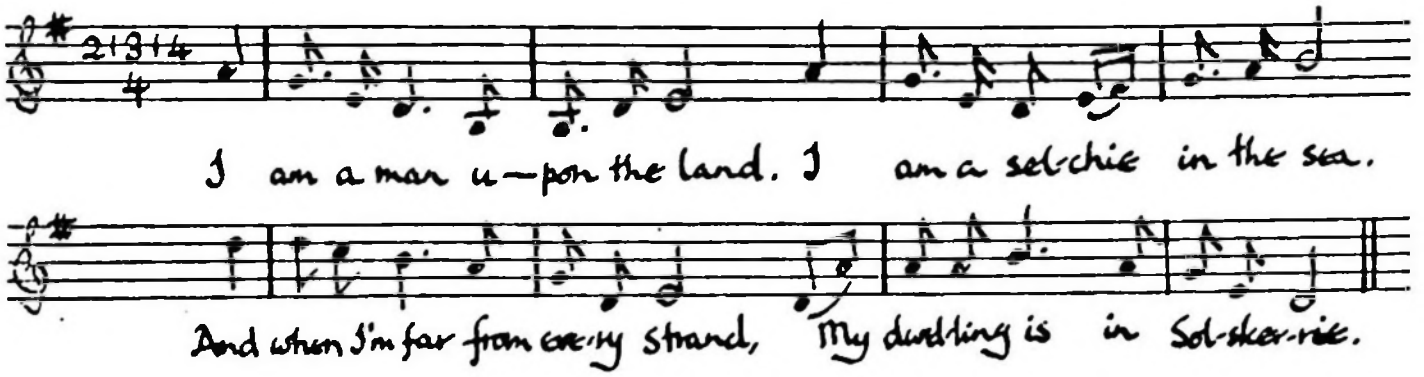
Child himself notes another fragment, also from Shetland and apparently independent, sent in to Karl Blind (1881:404) by his correspondent George Sinclair, jr., a Shetlander living in New Zealand: we may call this 'C', since it is not the next version collected.

C

"I am a man upo' da land;
I am a selkie i' da sea.
An' whin I'm far fa every strand
My dwelling is in Shöol Skerry."

Bronson's monumental supplement to Child (Bronson 1962:564–5) quotes only one more text and a tune, which do not in fact belong together. The tune was collected by the late Professor Otto Andersson of Åbo, Finland, on a trip to Orkney in 1938, from Mr (John?) Sinclair, Flotta, once more to the words corresponding to A3: F below seems to be his text, as given by Andersson (1954:39).

F



"I am a man upon the land.
I am a Selchie in the sea.
And when I'm far from every strand,
My dwelling is in Solskerrie."

A full set of words was added by Andersson on each occasion when he published the ballad. Bronson apparently uses those from the later, English article (Andersson 1954: 39–41), which are based on a transcript from *The Orcadian* of 11 January 1934, though his notes suggest that he is using those from the earlier Swedish article (Andersson 1947). The latter were supplied by Miss Anne G. Gilchrist of the English Folk Dance and Song Society, and the only major difference seems to be that A5 is introduced in place of the ninth verse. I am grateful to my friend Mr Ernest Marwick for pointing out what must be the ultimate source of both these texts in a nineteenth-century travelogue (Fergusson 1883:140–1; 1884:241–4). D below follows the first edition, but the only substantial difference in the later edition is the use of the more conventional spelling for Sule Skerry.

Fergusson seems to have known the South Isles of Orkney best, judging by his travels and the vocabulary of his own dialect lullaby, 'Ba, ba, lammie noo' (Fergusson 1883: 159–60). It was 'a South Isles correspondent' who later sent in the ballad to *The Orcadian*, and it seems likely that it is a South Isles text. Certainly, as the parallel texts below show, it is very like G, a version which I recorded from James Henderson, Burray, a native of Gairth, South Ronaldsay.[3] Mr Henderson learned the ballad from the singing of his mother (born Isabella Dass) before 1918. He tells me that his mother always broke off singing toward the end, and briefly narrated the passage which D also gives in prose before singing the last verses: thus, though he has forgotten a few lines or even verses towards the end, this gap is not the result of his lapse of memory, and may well have been a regular feature of the ballad.

G

1 There lived a maid in the Norway lands:
"Hush ba loo lilly," she did sing;
"I dinna ken where my babe's father is
Or what lands he travels in."

2 Now it happened one night
As this fair maid lay fast asleep
That in there came a grey selkie
And laid himself down at her bed feet,

D

1 In Norway lands there lived a maid.
"Hush, ba, loo lillie," this maid began,
"I know not where my baby's father is,
Whether by land or sea does he travel in."

2 It happened on a certain day,
When this fair lady fell fast asleep,
That in cam' a good grey selchie,
And set him doon at her bed feet,

3 Crying, "Awake, awake, my (?)pretty
maid,
For thy babe's father's sitting at thy
bed feet.

4 "For I'm a man upon the land,
A selkie in the sea,
And I do come from the Wast'ard o
Hoy
Which wise men do call Sule Skerrie.

5 "My name it is good Hyne Malair:
I earn my livin by the sea,
An when I'm far from ev'ry shore
It's then I am in Sule Skerrie."

6 "Oh what a fate, what a weary fate,
What a weary fate's been laid for
me,
That a selkie should come from the
Wast'ard o Hoy
To the Norway lands to have a
babe with me."

7 "Oh I will wed thee with a ring,
With a ring, my dear, I'll wed with
thee."
"Thou may wed thu's weds[4] with
whom thou wilt,
But I'm sure thou'll ne'er wed
none wi me."

8 "Then thou shalt nurse thy little wee
son
For seven long years upon thy
knee:
And at the end of seven years
I'll come an pay thy nurse's fee."

9 It's oh, she's nursed her little wee son
For seven years upon her knee:
And he's come back a gay gentleman
With a coffer[5] of gold and white
monie.

3 Saying, "Awak', awak', my pretty maid,
For oh! how sound as thou dost
sleep!
An' I'll tell thee where thy baby's
father is;
He's sittin' close at thy bed feet."

4 "I pray, come tell to me thy name,
Oh! tell me where does thy dwelling
be?"
"My name it is good Hein Mailer,
An' I earn my livin' oot o' the sea.

5 "I am a man upon the land;
I am a selkie in the sea;
An' whin I'm far frae every strand,
My dwellin' is in Shool Skerrie."

6 "Alas! alas! this woeful fate!
This weary fate that's been laid for
me!
That a man should come frae the Wast
o' Hoy,
To the Norway lands to have a bairn
wi' me."

7 "My dear, I'll wed thee with a ring.
With a ring, my dear, I'll wed wi'
thee."
"Thoo may go wed thee weddens wi'
whom thoo wilt;
For I'm sure thoo'll never wed none
wi' me."

8 "Thoo will nurse my little wee son

For seven long years upo' thy knee,
An' at the end o' seven long years
I'll come back an' pay the norish
(nursing) fee."

9 She's nursed her little wee son
For seven long years upo' her knee,
An' at the end o' seven long years
He cam' back wi' gold and white
monie.

10 She says, "I'll wed thee with a ring,
With a ring, my dear, I'll wed with thee."
"Thou may wed thee's weds[4] with whom thou wilt,
I'm sure thou'll ne'er wed none wi me.

11 "But you will get a gunner good,
And aye a good gunner he'll be,
And he'll gaeng out on a Mey morning
And he'll shoot the son and the Grey Selkie."

(So he took the son away, and . . .)

12 " . . . I'll put a gold chain about his neck,[6]
That if ever he comes to the Norway lands,
It's oh, well knowèd he may be."

13 And oh, she got a gunner good,
And aye a good gunner was he,
And he gaed out one May morning
An he shot the son and the Grey Selkie.

(Then he returned and showed her this wonderful thing that he'd found, the gold chain on the selkie's neck . . .[6])

14 " . . . you've done. . . .
For you have shot good Hyne Malair
And oh, he was right kind to me."

15 She gied a sigh, sobbed aince or twice,
And then her tender hert did brak in three.

10 She says, "My dear, I'll wed thee wi' a ring,
Wi' a ring, my dear, I'll wed wi' thee."
"Thoo may go wed thee weddens wi' whom thoo will;
For I'm sure thoo'll never wed none wi' me.

12 "An' thoo will get a gunner good,
An' a gey good gunner it will be,
An' he'll gae oot on a May mornin'
An' shoot the son an' the grey selchie.

11 "But I'll put a gold chain around his neck,
An' a gey good gold chain it'll be,
That if ever he comes to the Norway lands,
Thoo may hae a gey good guess on hi'."

13 Oh! she has got a gunner good,
An' a gey good gunner it was he,
An' he gaed oot on a May mornin',
An' he shot the son and the grey selchie.

When the gunner returned from his expedition and shewed the Norway woman the gold chain, which he had found round the neck of the young seal, the poor woman, realising that her son had perished, gives expression to her sorrow in the last stanza:

14 "Alas! alas! this woeful fate!
This weary fate that's been laid for me!"
An' ance or twice she sobbed and sighed,
An' her tender heart did brak in three.

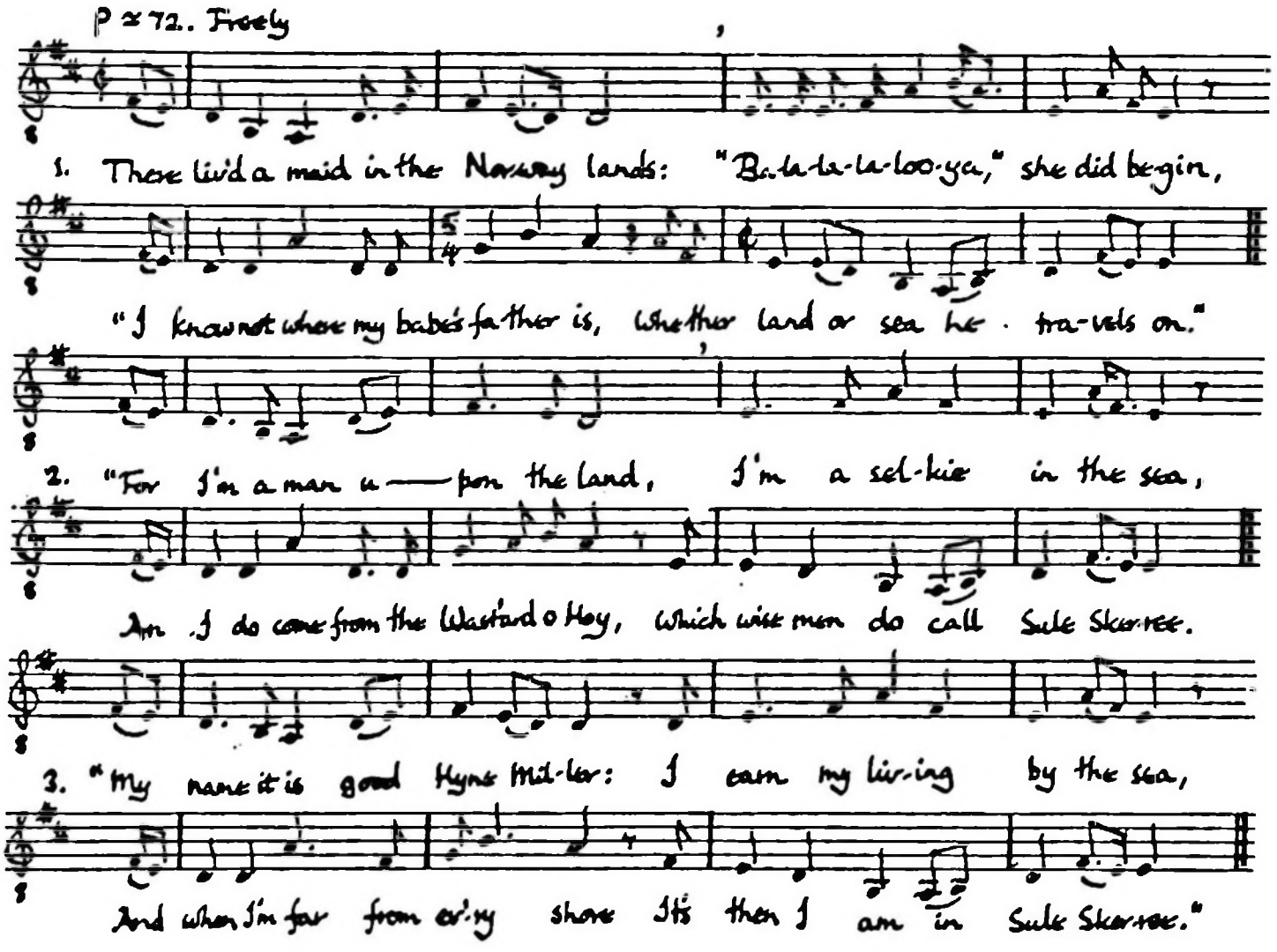
The ballad, 'known only by some of the older folks' (presumably women, as Fergusson speaks of 'fair Orcadians') in 1883, has survived a little longer than this remark might imply. In fact Mr Henderson remembers it better than many of the other Child ballads his mother sang, partly no doubt because of its Orkney associations, but also perhaps because of its very tightly-knit structure, where each verse leads on to the next logically, and none is superfluous. The language is admittedly more influenced than A by the conventional English of the broadsheet ballads, and forms such as 'thou wilt' appear alongside the Scots 'thou will' in D and have ousted it in G. But there is none of the unnecessary verbiage, in broadsheet manner, which so often mars late northern versions of the older ballads. Much of the ballad is in dialogue, which adds to the dramatic effect. Occasionally a line is repeated without adding anything, but every verse serves a purpose in carrying on the story, which may indeed be analysed in fashionable binary terms:

1 Heroine introduced:
[she laments that she does not know where her baby's father is.
2, 3 Her baby's father appears in seal form, announces himself,
4, 5 and reveals his name, home and nature.
6 Heroine reacts, lamenting her fate.]
[7 He offers to marry her;
she refuses.
8 He engages her to nurse his son for seven years.]
[9 After seven years he returns (in human form) to pay her (and claim his son.)
10 She offers to marry him;
he refuses.]
[G11, D12 He foretells the shooting of himself and his son.]
[G12, D11 He (she?[6]) provides a recognition token (gold chain.)
13 The selkie and his son are shot.
G14 Heroine recognises by the token that they are dead,
D14, G15 laments and dies.]

The heroine's refusal to marry her lover and his refusal to marry her when she later changes her mind is a common theme of tradition, well known in broadsheet ballads, but there is no reason to doubt that it is an integral part of this ballad. Though A reduces the plot very effectively to a single scene, preserving the unities of time and place—the nurse's fee is paid down on the spot, and the final tragedy is told only in the prophecy—this dramatic device is probably simply caused by many verses having been forgotten on the journey from Orkney to Shetland: it is just by luck that the ballad has been pared to the bone without the skeleton falling apart entirely. We may recognise that the language is older than in the South Isles redaction, but this perhaps means that we should envisage an early form with the structure of the latter but the language more like A.

Mr Henderson has unfortunately never been able to 'hold a tune', and though he is very willing to help it has not yet been possible to try to reconstruct his mother's tune by trial and error. It certainly began on a rising major triad, and was quite different from the tune below, though similar in rhythm. This tune is from another South Ronaldsay man, John George Halcro, whose family came from Windwick in the South Parish. He learned it from his father James Halcro,[7] who was a first cousin to Mrs Isabella Henderson (brother's son and sister's daughter). Despite the relationship—perhaps because they lived a few miles apart—their versions of the ballad seem to have differed considerably in tune and perhaps in text also. Unfortunately Mr Halcro has so far been unable to lay hands on a text which he wrote down in his father's lifetime, but he has sung me three verses of a text which we will call H: the last verse was prompted by reading Mr Henderson's text.[8]

H



1 There liv'd a maid in the Norway lands:
"Ba-la-la-la-loo-ya," she did begin,
"I know not where my babe's father is,
Whether land or sea he travels on."

2 (=E4) "For I'm a man upon the land,
I'm a selkie in the sea,
An I do come from the West'ard o Hoy
Which wise men do call Sule Skerrie.

3 (=E5) "My name it is good Hyne Miller:
I earn my living by the sea,
And when I'm far from ev'ry shore
It's then I am in Sule Skerrie."

There remain to be considered two further versions of the ballad, both overlooked by Bronson, which can be taken as forming a distinct 'North Isles redaction', though as we shall see some of the redaction may be conscious and the distinction is not so great as it appears. Both of them were collected in the mid-nineteenth century, B in 1860, E printed in 1894 but gathered together, the collector claimed, over the previous forty years. B was taken down by Charles R. Thomson, Howar, then Bailiff or factor of North Ronaldsay, for John Keillor, the minister of the island. Keillor was one of several people enlisted by Lady Caroline Charteris to help her nephew John Francis Campbell of Islay in collecting traditional material, but his Orcadian traditions were of little use for the *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, and lay unnoticed among Campbell's MSS in the National Library of Scotland (MS. 50.1.13 f.316) until they were brought to the attention of David Thomson, who printed the ballad in *The People of the Sea* (Thomson 1954:205–7). E is woven into the extraordinary long poem, 'The Play o' de Lathie Odivere', which Walter Traill Dennison published in *The Scottish Antiquary* (Dennison 1894:53–8), and has been reprinted several times, in *County Folklore* (Black 1903: 235–48), *An Anthology of Orkney Verse* (Marwick 1949:54–64), adapted into Scots (Montgomerie 1951) and most recently woven into George Mackay Brown's *An Orkney Tapestry* (Brown 1969).

It is necessary to dwell a little here on the nature of this 'play' which seems to be accepted as genuine, indeed as sixteenth-century, by Orkney's most considerable living writer, and also by a prominent Scottish ballad scholar (Montgomerie 1951). Dennison's own claim is given in his introduction:

> In the olden times, Orcadians at their convivial meetings amused themselves by rude dramatical representations, in which lower animals often appeared on the scene. In these performances the menye-singers acted the principal part. They were professionals hired to sing, recite or act for the entertainment of the company.
>
> This ballad was at one time represented as a drama by the menye-singers.

No other source supports this, and Dennison is our only authority for the term 'menye-singers', which looks suspiciously like an attempt to adapt the mediæval German *Minnesänger* to Scots by substituting an English (not a Norse) first element.[9] Dennison

refers to A as representing 'a few stanzas of the ballad', so the kinship is admitted. In fact the traditional core of the 'play' seems to be the third 'Fit'[10] and the substance of some verses in the fourth. It is difficult to see the rest as anything but Dennison's own composition, occasionally reinforced by lines which can be recognised as borrowings from other ballads.

At first Dennison's own account seems to claim only that he was reconstructing from a few fragments, but later it appears that every verse has a core of tradition:

> It is now well-nigh fifty years since I first heard parts of this ballad, and for forty years I have been gathering up fragmentary scraps of it from many old people in different parts of Orkney. But of all my informants, I owe most to my late accomplished friend Mrs. Hiddleston, a lady who, while fully appreciating the beauties of modern literature, never forgot the old tales and scraps of verse heard in the days of her childhood. We were both much puzzled by the name 'Milliegare', occurring in a line of her oral version. Both of us at length came to the conclusion that it was a corruption of Micklegarth, that being the old Norse name of Constantinople. It is right to say, that while the utmost care has been taken to preserve the original, and to select the best from the versions recited to me, I have often had to fill in a word, sometimes a line, in order to make the sense clear or to complete the stanza.

This is an understatement for the addition of the better part of eighty extra stanzas, but earlier nineteenth-century collectors had set no very good example.

Ernest Marwick, who has spoken to people who knew Dennison, tells me that by all he has heard, Dennison was not the sort of man to deceive his readers in such an elaborate way. He suggests that the Odivere ballad, if not purely traditional, may be the composition of some poetic laird of the seventeenth or eighteenth century which passed into oral tradition. But such a writer would hardly have used dialect, and an English or Scots original would be unlikely to have accumulated so much dialect *vocabulary* as the 'play' shows in a century or two of oral transmission. Moreover we have at least one other instance of a deliberately misleading introduction by Dennison. Of 'The Finfolk's Foy Sang' he writes:

> Among my juvenile papers I found a copy of the Finfolk's foy song; but as, when a boy, I added some lines to the oral original, and as I now, at a distance of nearly half a century, cannot distinguish between my tinkering and the original lines, it would be unfair to present the lines as a genuine product of tradition. . . . It is the only instance of continuous rhymes I have met with among our rude native verses, and is, so far as I know, a form of verse only used by some of the troubadours. (Dennison 1893:23).

A later note (Dennison 1893:81–2) elaborates the fiction: 'I believe this same Foy Sang is part of an oral drama called "The Finfolk's Play", once acted by the menye-singers.' Apart from the lack of a division into verses and the 'continuous rhymes'—all 35 lines rhyme on long *-a*—the only subject-matter is a quite untraditional example of the pastoral fallacy, put into the mouth of the seal-men with their underwater kingdom as

its Arcadia. In genuine tradition these beings were considered, like the fairies, to have fallen with Lucifer (*Tocher* 8:256–7) and were regarded as being at the least dangerous if not actually evil: no traditional singer would dream of putting himself in their place to compose a song beginning 'O' blithe is de land dat's fae man far awa!' and there is no question that the whole poem is Dennison's own. The note with its mention of menye-singers and plays shows the beginning of the process that produced 'Odivere', and the poem foreshadows the favourable view of the seal-people which is also taken in the 'play', where the heroine, though condemned to be burned for adultery with the selkie, is finally rescued by him, and the son is the only one to die—an ending unlike any version of the genuine ballad.

Supporters of 'Odivere' will no doubt consider the strong dialect in many lines as one of its genuine features. But other versions of our ballad are written in pure mainland Scots with hardly a dialect word, in the case of A and B, strongly influenced by broad-sheet English in D and G. In fact the lines of 'Odivere' which contain dialect words rather than dialect spellings are hardly ever those which derive from our original ballad or can be recognised as borrowings from other Scots ballads, but are largely designed to display Dennison's dialect vocabulary.[11]

Allowing at least that the sources of 'Odivere' are dubious, or as Dennison spells it in dialect 'jubish', we may treat its core, the Third Fit, as largely genuine. In the parallel texts below this (E) is given beside the North Ronaldsay text, B, with which many verses correspond. Where B has no parallel I have added comments to suggest whether Dennison's lines are traditional, new composition or a rewriting of the traditional original. It may well be that Dennison knew versions of our ballad from 'different parts of Orkney': the first line of the First Fit, 'In Norawa a lathie bed' [bade], is virtually the first line of D put into dialect, and it is possible that the offer of marriage in verse 22 below—quite inappropriate in Dennison's form of the tale, where the heroine is already married[12]—has crept in from a version of the South Isles redaction, which might indeed be the printed text D. Basically, however, it may fairly be assumed that he was using a version or versions from his native isle of Sanday, which could be expected to resemble one from the neighbouring isle of North Ronaldsay.

E	B
1 I heard a lathie ba'an her bairn; An' aye shü rockit, an' aye shü sang, An' teuk sae hard apo' de verse, Till de hert within her bothie rang.	1 I heard a Mither ba'ing her Bairn An ay she rockit an she sang She took sae hard upo' the verse Till the heart within her body rang
2 "Ba loo, ba loo, me bonnie bairn, Ba lo lillie, ba loo lay, Sleep do, me peerie bonnie budo! Doo little kens dee mither's wae.	2 O' row cradle an go cradle An ay sleep thou my Bairn within O' little ken I my Bairns Faither Or yet the land that he liggs in

3 "Aloor! I dinno ken dee faither,
Aloor, aloor! me waefu' sin!
I dinno ken me bairn's faither,
Nor yet de land dat he lives in.

[E 2 c,d and 3 a,b, are doubtful—the lady protests too much, no doubt because here she is married, and Dennison uses two of his favourite dialect words.[13]]

4 "Aloor! aloor! ca'd sall I be
A wicked woman bae a' men,
Dat I, a married wife, soud hae
A bairn tae him I dünno ken."

[Certainly spurious—emphasising the adultery element.]

5 Dan ap an' spak a grimly gest,
Dat stüd sae lech at her bed feet,
"O here am I, dee bairn's faither,
Alto I'm no' dee husband sweet."

3 O up than spake a Grimly Ghost
An aye sae laigh at her Beds feet
O here am I, thy bairns faither
Although I'm nae thy luve sae sweet

6 "Me bairn's faither I ken do are,
Na luve sae sweet I'll ever hae;
An' yet I hae a gude, gude man,
Dats far awa fae me dis day."

[Spurious—indeed contradicting the genuine lines of E3: note that E like B probably had "luve sae sweet" in the preceding verse, as it is echoed here.]

7 "I care no for dee wadded carl,
I wus his face I'll never see,
Bit whin sax munt is come an' gaen,
I'll come an' pay de noris fee.

5 An foster weel my young young Son
An' for a Twalmont an a day
An' when the twalmont's fairly done
I'll come an pay the nourice's fee.

8 "Hids no' be said doo tint bae me,
A bodle wirt o' warly gare,
Sae whin I come, doos get dee fee,
An' I me bairn tae be me heir."

[Very doubtful—again unnecessarily explicit, perhaps to make up for the omission of the "foster weel . . ." couplet in the preceding verse.]

9 "Noo, for de luve I bür tae dee,
A luve dats brought me muckle sheem,
O tell me whar dee heem may be,
An' tell me true dee vera neem?"

[The second line is still harping on her shame and must be spurious, but the question, if not its wording, may be genuine: *cf.* D4a, b.]

10 "San Inravoe hid is me neem;
I gong on land; an' sweem on sea;
Amang de ranks o' selkie folk
I am a yarl o' hich degree.

4 Jo Immrannoe it is my name
Jo Immranoe they do ca me
An my lands they lie Baith braid an wide
Amang the rocks o' Sule Skerry

11 "I am a man apo' de land,
I am a selkie i' de sea;
Me heem it is de Soola-Skerry,
An' a' dats dare is under me.

[Not in B but, except the last line, certainly genuine by other parallels.]

12 "Mair or a thoosan selkie folk,
Tae me a willan sarvice gae;
An' I am king o' a' de folk,
An' la' tae dem is what I say."

[No other version makes him king of the selkies, and I think this, like the preparatory lines at the end of the two preceding verses, is Dennison's addition.]

13 "Oh who can doo de bairn tak,
An who can doo de bairn save?
I' dee cald heem doo'l only mak
De grimby sea me bairn's grave.

[Read "hoo can doo dee bairn tak." Doubtful; no parallels and the rhyme of first and third lines is perhaps unlikely.]

14 "Me peerie bairn I'll safely ferry,
To I hae nather ship or skift,
Wi' muckle care tae Soolis-Skerry,
Afore de sin's hich i' de lift.

[To—"though." The rhyme of "ferry" and "Skerry" certainly sounds too good to be true.]

15 "Bit who sall I me young son ken,—
An' who sall I me bairn know?"
"O' a' de selkies i' Soolis-Skerry
He's be de middlemist o' dem a'.

6 But how shall I my young Son ken
An how shall I my young Son knaw
Mang a' the Selkies i' Sule Skerry
He will be midmost amang them a'

16 "His megs sall a' be black as seut,
His croopan white as driven snaw,
An' I beside him, like the sam'
I wus tae dee i' times awa'."

[Doubtful—could be added simply as an excuse to use the words "megs" (fore flippers) and "croopan" (trunk, body.)]

At this point we have the clearest evidence of all that Dennison has been tampering with the text: the gunner (married by the heroine in A, 'got'—which may well mean the same thing—by her in D and G, already married to her in B as in E) is too modern, and all mention of gunners and shooting is carefully deleted to suit the mediaeval setting, and replaced by a stout-fisted warrior with a club:

17 "Me ain gudeman a warrior prood,
An' aye a stival nave his he;
An' he may prick or club me bairn,
When he's a selkie i' de sea."

7 My husband is a proud Gunner
An aye a proud gunner is he
An the first Shot that he will fire
Will be at my young Son an' thee

8 I fear nae livin proud Gunner
I fear nae Mortal man quo he
For pouther winna burn i saut
Sae I an thy young Son'l gae free

18 "I fear no dat, I fear bit dis,
Dat cockra comes an' fiands me here;
Bit come what may, I come agen,
An' fetch me bairn i' ae half year.

[Doubtful—perhaps reconstructed on the basis of a verse like B8, using a genuine second line from another ballad?]

19 "For dan he'll be a seeveneth stream,
An' dan a man agen I'll be,
An' tak me bonnie peerie bairn
A' tae de boons o' Soolis-Skerrie."

[I suspect this is inserted to emphasise the belief mentioned elsewhere by Dennison (1893:176) that seals became men at every seventh spring-tide.][14]

20 Whin de sax munts were come an' geen,
He cam' tae pay de noris fee;
The tane o' his hands wus fu' o' gowd
De tither fu' o' white monie.

9 O when that weary Twalmont gaed
he Cam' to pay the Nourice fee
he had ae coffer fu' o' Gowd
an anither fu o white money

21 De lathie's taen a gowden chain,
Her wadin boon fae Odivere,
Shü tied hid roon her bairn's hars,
Hid for her sake shü bade him wear.

[Second line presumably editorial, but in substance this verse, which is essential to the plot later, must be genuine, whether it derives from the North Isles version or a South Isles one.]

22 "I'm come tae fetch me bairn awa;
Fare weel, for doo'r anithers wife."
"I wad dee wi' a gowden ring,
An' bide beside dee a' me life."

[The two inconsistent halves of this verse point to the use of a different, no doubt South Isles, version; probably only the third line retains the original words.]

23 "Doo wad no', whin I wad gude wife;
I winno, whin doo'r willan noo,
Dat day doo tint doo'l never fiand;
He's late, he's ower late tae rue."

[Doubtful in wording, but sounds reasonably authentic because of the use of well-known sayings.]

24 De lathie lived a lanely life,
An' aften looks apo de sea,
Still lipenan her first luve tae fiand,
Bit jubish dat can never be.

[Bridge passage to next Fit, certainly supplied by Dennison: such a leisurely tempo of narrative is alien to the spirit of the traditional ballad.]

At this stage the two versions of the ballad depart so radically from each other that there is no longer any point in giving parallel texts. Dennison brings home the heroine's husband Sir Odivere from the Crusades in his Fourth Fit to play the gunner's part: he and his men set out to hunt otters, but a selkie runs out of a geo and is killed by Odivere 'wi' a mester blow'.[15]

Den oot an' spak, een o' his men,
"Far hae I sailed an' muckle seen,
Bit never gowd on selkie's hars,
Till noo I see'd wi' baith me een."

Dennison ingeniously adapts a line from the comic ballad 'Our Goodman' (Child 274) in a form known in the Northern Isles to serve as his second line. The selkie is taken to the hall and Odivere calls on his wife in words adapted from another ballad, 'The Bonnie Hoose o Airlie' (Child 199):

"Co' doon, co' doon! Lathie Odivare
Co' doon, an' see me farly fang . . .[16]

"Here's de gowd chain ye got fae me,
Tell me gude wife, whoo cam hid here?"

"Aloor, aloor! me bonnie bairn,
Me bairn! what am I born tae see?
Me malisen be on de hand
Dats wroucht dis deed o' blüd on dee!"

With this lamentation, which may be partly based on tradition, we can leave Dennison's 'play': the husband and wife flyting which follows and the lady's eventual rescue by the seals while the men are distracted by a whale-hunt were certainly never a part of our ballad.

The ending of B is quite different from all the other versions of the ballad, though it accords quite well with the general pattern of supernatural traditions. These selkies, like other shape-changing beings, here cannot be shot except with a silver bullet—metaphorically expressed in B8 by the phrase 'pouther winna burn i saut'[17]—so, when the gunner fires, his bullet misses and hits his wife, who has come to see her son.

10 Upo' the Skerry is thy young Son
Upo' the Skerry lieth he
Sin thou will see thy ain young Son
Now is the time tae Speak wi he

11 The Gunner lay ahind a rock
ahind a Tangie rock lay he
an' the Very first Shot the gunner loot
It Strack his wife aboon the Bree

12 Jo Immranoe an his young Son
Wi heavy hearts took tae the Sea
let a that live on Mortal Yird
Ne'er Mell wi' Selchies o' the Sea.

Though there is little doubt that B was taken down from an oral, probably a sung version,[18] this seems a little contrived: the heroine no doubt deserves punishment for her relations with a non-human being, but the sympathetic reference to the *selkies*' 'heavy hearts' in the last verse does not ring true. 'The Skerry' would suggest the North Ronaldsay Seal Skerry, which unlike Sule Skerry is well within sight from the main island, to any local hearer, and it seems not unlikely that these last verses and the unparalleled verse 8 were added by some local person to supply the defective version of the ballad which he had heard. Perhaps he used another existing story as the basis of his plot, and at least one surviving line of the lost verses—'the very first shot the gunner loot': compare A7 c, 'the very first schot that ere he schoots'. Certainly he was working within the tradition, and his work is much more acceptable than Dennison's.[19]

The less doubtful parts of the North Isles versions show, as might be expected, some parallels with A—the 'proud' gunner, the selkie's first appearance as a 'grimly ghaist', and the lack of the opening reference to Norway as the scene; some with the South Isles versions—the coffers of gold and white money, the fostering for a (varying) period; and some individual features—'the heart within her body rang', the heroine's married status, the selkie's name and his son's 'midmost' place on the skerry. There are evidently three separate families or redactions attested. It could be argued, following Dr David Buchan (1972: 51–173) that these represent the orally-composed improvisations of three different seventeenth- or eighteenth-century singers working on an 'oral-formulaic' basis, deploying a repertoire of stock couplets, lines and phrases within an elastic plot framework: at some point a singer learned off a version, probably of his own composition,[20] by heart and from then on the variation within the various families has been much less. In favour of this are the totally different names of the Selkie in the North and South Isles redactions, and the different relationships between the heroine and the gunner, quite a basic feature of the plot. Against it are verbal correspondences between all three families in such speeches as 'Little ken I where my bairn's father is' or 'I am a man upon the land'. But it could be argued, particularly on the basis of parallels from the telling of folktales, that certain passages, especially formal dialogue, in a ballad story could be established in a fixed form at an early date while the rest of the narration was carried on in the singer's own words. On the other side it might be argued that the North Isles versions show what deliberate tampering can do to change the form of a ballad, in one instance without forcing it out of oral currency. What we can say is that a single act of creation, and that in Scots though in Orkney, therefore probably not much before the beginning of the seventeenth century,[21] lies behind all the versions. Our ballad may have been based on a tale that had been told in Norse, even on a Norse ballad, but as we have it it was launched into and carried down on a Scots stream of tradition.

It may yet be possible to save more tunes, if not more words, to set beside the versions above. I would certainly like to see one of the genuine tunes sung as widely as the modern composition used for text A by many 'folksingers' of the revival, which is

attractive enough but for the slow waltz rhythm which is not like anything in traditional Scottish songs. One judgment on the existing texts may be allowable. Traill Dennison's 'Play o de Lathie Odivere' is a brave attempt to write an extended poem—longer, though not very much, than any ballad actually sung in Orkney[22]—in full Orcadian dialect. The South Isles redaction represents the same Scots ballad which was the basis of Dennison's poem, converted, perhaps by the gradual influence of a new taste rather than by any conscious rewriting, into a song in the anglicised broadsheet manner. Yet however inferior the language the latter provides the more concise, more dramatic, more expressive and less sentimental telling of the story. The processes of oral transmission may absorb vulgarities from printed sources at times, but they act as a perpetual filter to clear out the extravagant and unnecessary with time, and achieve a natural balance and good taste which no conscious imitator of folksong has the detachment to emulate. I would rather have had the original Sanday ballad in full, with its tune, than the whole of Dennison's dialect epic.

NOTES

1 A selkie is simply a seal, though readers of the ballad have tended to assume that in itself it means a seal which can take human form. Hence 'The Silkie' has been used not only for the name of a group of singers, but for a science fiction novel.

2 Child gives Thomas's text unchanged, apart from punctuation and apostrophes, with the exception of 'quhen' in verse 6, which is probably not an archaism but an attempt to express a sound which in Shetland varies between *wh* and *qu*. 'Schot' and 'schoot' in verse 7 may also be intended phonetically, perhaps just for the sonorous Shetland back *sh*. Despite Thomas's punctuation, verse 6 is obviously spoken by the father.

3 SA 1970/229 A5, with some minor variants from a later recording, SA 1972/168 A5: see also notes 5 and 6.

4 'Go wed thu's weds' in both verses 7 and 10 on the later recording: perhaps Mrs Henderson sang 'Thou may go' as in C.

5 'Pocket' in the later recording: compare E20 below.

6 Possibly 'a gay gold chain'—is this a reminiscence of 'a gey good gold chain'? On the later recording Mr Henderson said 'a gold ring upon his hand' (verse 12) and ' . . . on his flipper' (in the narration), but this is no doubt merely a slip. Apparently the mother supplies the chain, as in E but not in D where the chain seems a substitute for the rejected ring, and so this verse, not the prophecy, follows verse 10.

7 In 1972 he also mentioned the late William Sinclair ('Billy o Stane'), a well-known singer in the South Parish of South Ronaldsay, as a source, but he has not repeated this, and though James Henderson and his cousin John Dass learned many songs from Billy, this was not one of them.

8 Verse 1, SA 1972/166 A7; verses 2 and 3, SA 1973/77 B7. Note that the selkie's Dutch-sounding name is clearly 'Miller' stressed on the last syllable here. There are several parallels for the difference in tunes within one island: thus John Halcro and his second cousin John Dass have quite distinct tunes for the shipwreck songs 'The *Middlesex Flora*' and 'The Brig *Columbus*' (of which the first is from Ireland and the second a local composition.) Though the old Scots lulling syllables 'ba loo (lillie)' are here assimilated to 'Alleluia' they are not long out of use: James Henderson's mother used them so often as a lullaby (to hymn tunes or any tune that came to mind in her old age) that his children called her 'Granny Baloo'.

9 He even writes: 'The writer thinks that the name came to Orkney from Germany.' (Dennison 1961: 83.) *Minne* of course means 'love'. The *Scottish National Dictionary* does quote some nineteenth-century and later instances of *menyie* in the sense of 'throng' or 'medley' from the North of Scotland, though the only Orcadian instances are Dennison's own compounds *menye-singers* and *menye-cogs*. His spelling is that commonly used by Scott and other historical novelists, and they may be the real source.

10 'The ballad was always divided into fits, but I have been told that its divisions were once called by another name, which I have been unable to discover' (Dennison 1894:53). It seems, however, that 'fit' (a romantic archaism) is claimed to be the current name.

11 'Probably most of the oral verse in Orkney would be lost when the Norse language was forgotten by the people; and the fragments that remained in the newly adopted language must have been rude translations by native bards or menye-singers. While it is therefore unlikely that we should meet with anything very old in our oral verse, yet it should not be forgotten that the Norse and the Scots languages existed together for a considerable time in these islands; and to a considerable extent the two languages became amalgamated. So that the dialect used by the peasantry during the eighteenth century may be regarded as Scoto-Norse, gradually fading into oblivion before the English of the elementary schools. Without dwelling on the subject, it may be said, that every word in the ballad added by me has been carefully chosen as the most suitable and oldest Orkney word I know' (Dennison 1894:53). The corollary holds true: wherever the dialect words (rather than dialect forms) are thin on the ground, the line is likely to be genuine and not added by Dennison. His picture of the linguistic history of Orkney is over-simplified: Norn ballads were current in North Ronaldsay about 1770 (Marwick 1929:227, quoting Scott) and may still have been being composed or added to in one island while our Scots ballad was circulating in others or even among the same people. (A similar situation between Gaelic and Scots or English is to be found in some bilingual regions today, with some local bards actually ready to compose songs in either language.) But the hybrid, basically Scots dialect of the 'peasantry' was not apparently used for poetry until recent times, with the possible exception of the New Year Song, 'St. Mary's Men', and did not even influence the vocabulary of imported Scots songs much in the course of oral transmission.

12 It seems that in B she is already married (to the gunner). But possibly Dennison's amplification of this detail into the basis of much of his poem draws on some different traditional tale, though his crusader setting smacks more of Ivanhoe than Earl Rognvald.

13 *Aloor!* (alas) and *büddo* (darling) are often used by Dennison—though admittedly they were not uncommon features in the spoken dialect: the first was certainly used a generation ago and the second can still be heard from the oldest generation in the North Isles.

14 He notes however (Dennison 1893:173) 'these periods were a subject of dispute among my oral authorities', and Keillor in his MSS. accompanying B (NLS 50. 1. 13 f. 324^{v}) gives it as the North Ronaldsay belief that seals could become men and women at every *ninth* stream tide.

15 'Mester' in the sense of 'mighty' is no doubt original in the titles of the traditional tales of 'The Mester Ship' and 'Assipattle and the Mester Stoorworm' given by Dennison (1891:68, 130) but again it is a word which he evidently liked and used as much as possible.

16 A minimum of adaptation is needed from the sound of 'Ogilvie' to 'Odivere' and from 'kiss me fairly' to 'see me farly fang'—*i.e.* 'see my wonderful catch'.

17 This is surely metaphor rather than actual belief: salt is usually invoked *against* supernatural beings and their magic, for instance to capture the vanishing isle of Eynhallow (Dennison 1893:117–20), and many Orcadians must have known that it was possible to shoot ordinary seals in or by salt water. The usual form of the belief is illustrated from North Ronaldsay in another passage from Keillor's MS (f. 323^{v}): a man shooting rabbits by night saw a strange pony which he decided must be Tangie (the Orkney sea-kelpie.) He could not shoot it until he put a sixpence in the gun; then it fell, and he left the body on the shore to be carried out by the tide.

18 Charles Thomson's MS consists of three folded sheets: the ballad is on both sides of the sixth leaf and is clearly intended to be part of the collection. But it is written in a hand barely recognisable as the neat if rather crabbed script in which the rest of the MS (containing the well-known tale of the Goodman of Westness and his seal bride) is written: in the accompanying letter he asks Keillor to transcribe his MS in a better hand, and must, I think, have meant the ballad in particular. There is no punctuation at all and the use of capitals is eccentric. In fact it looks rather like Campbell of Islay's own notes made in the field, and it seems very likely that the ballad was written down directly from the dictation or more probably singing of Thomson's informant, not retold in his own words like the accompanying tale. Thomson might incidentally be the educated North Ronaldsay source for Dennison's version of the latter (Dennison 1893:173), so he *may* also be one of his sources for the ballad.

19 This is not to say that his ballad is artistically more acceptable: in five verses, three of them apparently entirely genuine, the second line virtually repeats the first in a way which adds nothing to the effect. Possibly 'the very first shot' in B11 is simply deduced from B7 c, the line corresponding to A7 c, but if so 'very' has dropped out there in our text.

20 This seems probable on empirical grounds, since if other singers always improvised slightly differently it would be impossible to learn the ballad word-for-word by listening to successive performances: it would be necessary to perfect one's own improvised version to learn. Parallels from Gaelic prose storytelling support this: in Gaelic tales the narrative is always told in the teller's own words, but dialogue and descriptive passages in the more formal heroic tales draw largely on a stock of formulas —runs, proverbs, witty answers and other clichés. The South Uist storytellers Duncan MacDonald and Angus MacLellan were recorded often enough in their later years to make it clear that they repeated their longer tales almost in the same words each time, but it is clear from stories such as *Conall Gulban*, which both of them had learned from Duncan's father, that they were repeating not the words of their source, but a version deliberately put together and polished up for their own use.

21 Scots speakers were in Orkney long before it passed to the Scottish Crown, but Scots probably only overtook Norn as the language of the bulk of the people after the beginning of the seventeenth century (Marwick 1929:xxiv). I think it is fair to assume that a ballad in Scots would not have been made out of a native story before that date; and this agrees with the period from which the majority of extant historical ballads in the classical style seem to date by their subject-matter.

22 'Odivere' has 93 stanzas. Several ballads which were popular in Orkney before 1914, and were actually sung all through, are between half and two-thirds as long: 'Andrew Lammie' (Child 233, which incidentally *was* performed as a play in Orkney not so long ago) has some 55 verses, 'Sir James the Rose' (Child 213, the 'Michael Bruce' text) is equally long, 'The Turkey Factor' has 48 quatrains of longer lines. Typically, though all these three ballads seem to be of Scottish composition, only the first makes any pretence to be in Scots, and in the long modern version it is much anglicised.

REFERENCES

ANDERSSON, OTTO
1947 'Wäinämöinen och Wellamos Jungfru', *Budkavlen* 1947. Åbo.
1954 'Ballad hunting in the Orkney Islands', *Budkavlen* 1954:23–58. Åbo.

BLACK, GEORGE F. (comp.)
1903 *County Folk-Lore, vol. III . . . Orkney and Shetland Islands.* Folk-Lore Society publications 49. London.

BLIND, KARL
1881 'Scottish, Shetlandic and Germanic Water Tales, Part II', *The Contemporary Review* 40:399–423. London.

BRONSON, BERTRAND H.
1962 *The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads*, vol. II. Princeton, N.J.
BROWN, GEORGE MACKAY
1969 *An Orkney Tapestry*. London.
BUCHAN, DAVID
1972 *The Ballad and the Folk*. London.
CHILD, FRANCIS J.
1886 *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. Vol. II, part IV. New York.
DENNISON, WALTER TRAILL
1891–1894 'Orkney Folklore: Sea Myths', *The Scottish Antiquary* between vol. 5 p. 68 and vol. 8 p. 58.
1961 'Orkney Weddings', pamphlet reprinted in *Orkney Folklore*, ed. E. W. Marwick. Kirkwall.
FERGUSSON, R. MENZIES
1883 *Rambling Sketches in the Far North and Orcadian Musings*. London.
1884 *Rambles in the Far North*. Second ed. [of the same]. Paisley.
MARWICK, ERNEST W.
1949 *An Anthology of Orkney Verse*. Kirkwall.
MARWICK, HUGH
1929 *The Orkney Norn*. London.
MONTGOMERIE, WILLIAM
1951 'The Orkney Play of the Lady Odivere in Lowland Scots' and commentary, *Scots* (formerly *Burns*) *Chronicle* 1951:38–61. Kilmarnock.
SA School of Scottish Studies Sound Archives.
THE SCOTTISH NATIONAL DICTIONARY
1931– Edinburgh.
THOMAS, F. W. L.
1852 'Shetland Ballad', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 1:86–9. Edinburgh.
THOMSON, DAVID
1954 *The People of the Sea*. London.
TOCHER
1971– Edinburgh.