

Jeannie Robertson: an appreciation

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It was my great fortune to know Jeannie for the last twenty years of her life.¹ I began listening to the tapes Hamish Henderson had collected from her when I came to the School of Scottish Studies in the autumn of 1954. Each one got better as I sat there day after day, strung up with earphones and sometimes literally caught up in the tape itself, and listened to that miraculous voice. Although I had just come from Nashville and had lived all my life in Tennessee—behind me seven generations of Scottish forbears in North America—I had never heard anybody sing like Jeannie. No voice as rich as hers, no style as commanding, no story as heroic in the telling as the ballads she sang. For six months I sat and listened and longed for an occasion when the real Jeannie might come down to the School or put in an appearance at a festival. Neither occasion was forthcoming that year, but already I admired the singer and what she represented out of all proportion to any casual meeting that might take place now or later.

Hamish saw what was going on and suggested that I transcribe some of Jeannie's texts and work on them for the sake of scholarship and Mr Fulbright, who had arranged for me to come in the first place. It was not until the next year and the renewal of the grant that I was able to go up to Aberdeen for a visit with Jeannie, her husband Donald and his brother Isaac. At the time they were living at 21 Causewayend in the Gallowgate. Not only was I welcomed by the three of them for a long session that first night, I was told to come back the next for a ceilidh they would put on with kinsfolk and traveller friends. So I not only heard Jeannie in her prime those two evenings, I heard so many other fine singers and pipers that the great Lowland music has rung in my ears ever since. I still remember Jeannie with a half-filled teacup, standing at the mantel, singing one of the big ballads to me and me alone for I had come further than the others and would have farther to go.

Over the years I went back again and again, in the summer. Not as a collector—Hamish was doing that with the greatest skill and success. I went back to the houses Jeannie, Donald and Isaac lived in in Montgomery Road and Hilton Road as a friend and admirer and also as a fellow traveller in the old ways; I met Lizzie² too and we were bound by the same themes in art and song that Yeats wrote about. Between meetings I kept in touch by letter and returning Americans who had come home enraptured with Jeannie. I urged her to accept some of the invitations she was receiving every year to sing in America. I promised her in one letter, I recall, that I would personally cool down the concert hall in Chicago, bring it down to Aberdeen norms so

she would run no risk of being stymied by central heat. Not even that gesture would bring her here; the money failed, too; the pace away from home was really not hers.

We did put one formal programme together—Jeannie singing, I introducing her songs—at Gladstone's Land during the Edinburgh Festival in 1967. Once she got started she did extremely well before an audience of international faces in the small crowded hall; I know she tried very hard for my sake. But, bless her, Jeannie was never meant to go commercial. I got to understand that fact and face it at long last, and I got to appreciate it more and more every time I saw Jeannie. For each time I did I was coming from Nashville, called Music City, U.S.A., where half the commercial records in America are cut, where traditional singers are all going the other way, playing to bigger audiences in front of louder microphones, piling up higher hair-dos, riding in shinier Cadillacs, and grinding out the chaff that has somehow made them rich and famous.

All this will surely pass if indeed it is done for money and fame and there is no heart in it. Jeannie was the real artist and towered above all the others because she plumbed depths they could not hope to reach. Not only the pathos, but also the tragedy in human life she knew, and felt, and memorialised in her songs. She knew the difference between tragedy and its hollow pretensions, between the real thing and a popular bathos. One Sunday afternoon in Edinburgh she sat with my wife Dona and me in Princes Street Gardens waiting for a concert in the bandshell. A newspaper left on the bench in front of us screamed out the lurid headlines: *MANAGER OF SINGING GROUP DIES BY OWN HAND*. We had all heard the group on the radio and seen them on television and knew about the great wealth accumulated by the manager. It was incredible to hear the trivial reasons that the paper gave for his death. Jeannie thought for a moment without changing the expression on her broad, leonine face. Then the dark eyes flashed and she said to us in one perfect sentence: 'Aye, and I'd like ye to tell me whit he might hae done if he'd had the real trouble.'

Bless you, Jeannie, for keeping us in touch with the real thing.

NOTES

- 1 Jeannie Robertson Higgins died 13th March 1975.

A series of articles on her and her style of singing have appeared at intervals in *Scottish Studies*:

I 'Portrait of a Traditional Singer,' vol. 12 (1968) pp. 113-26

II 'Jeannie Robertson: The Child Ballads,' vol. 14 (1970) pp. 35-58

III 'Jeannie Robertson: The 'Other' Ballads,' vol. 16 (1972) pp. 139-59

IV 'Jeannie Robertson: The Lyric Songs' (being prepared for a forthcoming issue)

(I is by Herschel Gower; II, III and IV by Herschel Gower and James Porter.)

- 2 A study of the singing style of Jeannie's daughter, Lizzie Higgins, has been made by Ailie Munro: *Scottish Studies* vol. 14 (1970), pp. 155-88.