

The Ballad 'King Orfeo'

PATRICK SHULDHAM-SHAW

During one of my early collecting trips to Shetland (it was either July 1946 or April 1947), I happened to be visiting Mr John Barclay of Mid Yell. I had been told that he was interested in Shetland music and Shetland lore in general and he showed me a number of items of interest which he allowed me to copy. Among these was a text of the ballad of 'King Orfeo' preserved as a cutting from *The Shetland News* of 25 August 1894. At that time my knowledge of balladry was minimal. I had heard of 'King Orfeo' and knew of the one version published in Child (no. 19), but this find, though I did take a copy of it, did not strike me at the time as being of particular interest as it had no tune. It was fortunate I had copied this text, however, or I would certainly not have recognised immediately a fragment of the same ballad that, strangely enough, I heard shortly afterwards.

It was at the end of April 1947 that I heard it, when I was visiting my old friend John Stickle of Hoy Villa, Baltasound, Unst. We were chatting away and he asked me what I had collected recently in other parts of Shetland. I sang him the little Hyiltadance jingle¹ I had just noted a day or two before from Jimsie Laurenson, Aithbank, Fetlar, and remarked what a curious bit of nonsense it was. He said that he could sing me something every bit as nonsensical, and at once started. As I listened and took down the tune and words on paper (there were no tape recorders in those days), I realised that what I was listening to was a fragment of 'King Orfeo'.² I was particularly thrilled, because it was the first time that anyone had noted a tune for this rare ballad. Now it could be brought to life in performance, and I found I was able to create a singable composite version of the ballad using John Stickle's fragment as a basis and supplying the rest of the story from the two printed versions.³ Gaps in the narrative of Child's version could be filled in from *The Shetland News* text, which is the most complete form of the ballad on record.

Following the discovery by Marion Stewart of the 'King Orphius' romance in the Scottish Record Office (published in *Scottish Studies* 17:1-16), the little-known text in *The Shetland News* should be of special interest and is given here as it appeared in that newspaper:⁴

AN OLD SONG

The following old song was procured and written down from oral recital at Gloup fishing station in 1865, by the late Mr Bruce Sutherland of Turfhouse, North Yell:

There lived a Lady in yon Haa,
Scowan Orlaa Grona;
Her name was Lady Lisa Bell,
Where gurtin grew for Norla.

One day the King a hunting went,
They wounded the Lady to the heart.

The King of the Fairies we his dart,
Wounded his Lady to the heart.

So when the King came home at noon,
He asked for Lady Lisa Bell.

His nobles unto him did say,
My Lady was wounded, but now she is dead.

Now they have taen her life fra me,
But her corps they's never ha.

Now he have called his nobles aa,
To waltz her corps into the Haa.

But when the Lords was fæn asleep,
Her corps out of the house did sweep.

Now he's awa' to the wood, wood were,
And there he's to sit till grown o'er we hair.

He had not sitten seven long years,
Till a company to him drew near.

Some did ride and some did ging,
He saw his Lady them among.

There stood a Haa upon yon hill,
There went aa the Ladie's tilt.

He is laid him on his belly to swim,
When he came it was a gray stane.

Now he's set him down ful wae,
And he's taen out his pipes to play.

First he played the notes of noy,
Then he played the notes of joy.

And then he played the gaber reel,
That might a made a sick heart heal.

There came a boy out of the Haa,
Ye'r bidden to come in among us aa.

The formost man to him did say,
What thou' ha' for thy play.

For my play I will thee tell,
I'll ha' my Lady Lisa Bell.

Thy sister's son, that unworthy thing,
To-morrow as to be crowned King.

But thou's take her and thou's go hem,
And thou shalt be King o'er thy own.

NOTES

- 1 The tune of this may be found in *Shetland Folk Book* vol II p. 20. Unfortunately the editors did not print the words with the tune; they are as follows:

Tree treetle daddle,
Dow diddle, dow diddle, dow diddle daddle,
Dow, dow, dow, dow, dowdle diddle daddle.

- 2 The tune and text that I noted, and later recorded, were first published in the *English Folk Dance and Song Society's Journal* for 1947 (pp. 77-8). Subsequently they were published in *Shetland Folk Book* vol. II, p. 20 (not with John Stickle's own text but with a slightly elongated version of the Child text from Mrs Saxby) and later still in Professor Bronson's *Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads* (Princeton) vol. I, p. 275. The version I recorded from John Stickle in 1951 may be found in the archives of the R P Library of the B B C, also in the Sound Libraries of the English Folk Dance and Song Society and the School of Scottish Studies.
- 3 A recording of my singing of this composite version was made at the request of Douglas Kennedy who used it to illustrate a lecture on ballads. This still exists as an acetate disc in the Sound Library of the English Folk Dance and Song Society.
- 4 P. 7, col. I. The item is headed, 'Notes and Queries. Relating to the Antiquities, Traditions and History of Orkney and Shetland. No. LXXV., August 25, 1894'. In the original, the second and fourth lines which form the chorus (and are in a somewhat degenerate form of the Norn language that was once spoken all over Shetland), were given in identical form in each verse. Here, in order to save space, they are given only in the first verse and are to be assumed in all the others. The full stops indicating stanza endings replace commas in the newspaper text (where the full stops come at the end of the second refrain line). The name of the newspaper was not printed on the cutting and I had the impression when I originally copied it that it was from *The Shetland Times*, and so referred to a version in that paper when I first published John Stickle's fragment.