

## Singing the Child Ballads

*Rosaleen writes:*

Someone asked me recently which Child ballads I sing and I couldn't make a very satisfactory reply at the time. But that started me wondering, so I've been checking them out and I found quite a few in my repertoire. Some are versions that stay close to one of Child's texts, others are composites created by revival singers or myself. Some I have known since my teens or early twenties; others I have only recently learned, and still others I've picked up somewhere along the way, most often from recordings or from a handful of well-thumbed books in my possession.

We thought it would be interesting – and fun – to print four ballads in each issue of the magazine in the versions (texts and tunes) that I sing, and to invite readers to submit their own “singing versions” of those ballads if they are sufficiently different. And we decided that we might as well start at the beginning, so here, in my singing versions, are the first four Child ballads: #1, “Riddles Wisely Expounded”; #2, “The Elfin Knight”; #3, “The Fause Knight upon the Road”; and #4, “Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight”. It so happens that I don't have any versions of Child #5, “Gil Brenton”; #6, “Willie's Lady”; #7, “Earl Brand”, and #8, “Erlinton”, so feel free to supply your versions of any of these as well. If we receive any in time, we'll include them in the next issue.

I reckon I have just over fifty Child ballads in my repertoire – yes, I was surprised to find it was so many – so at four in each issue, it will take thirteen issues to run through all my versions. Each time we will invite your submissions of singing versions of any ballads numbered *before* the four printed, as well as the four featured *and* the next four in Child's sequence. Got that? To repeat: *send us your versions of any Child ballad we have already printed or missed, or of any of the next four in Child's numbering scheme.* Please include both text and tune, since we are interested in *singing* versions in which words and melody go hand in glove.

We don't see the need to be over-scholarly about this, so we are quite willing to include versions that may have evolved quite a way from Child's text(s). After all, we know that variants can travel far (both geographically and textually) and yet still remain recognisably part of the same ballad cluster. If you can make a case for your song being derived from

one of the canon, we'll take your word for it and leave it to our readers to challenge, if they want to. So to start with we invite you to send us your favourite singing versions of the first *eight* Child ballads. With luck we'll have some of your submissions to print in the next issue, along with our second batch from my repertoire. We do hope that you will join me in this “quest for the ballad” by sharing your versions of these well-loved songs. Here are a few notes on my versions:

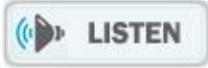
1. *Riddles Wisely Expounded.* My text is a composite from Child's versions A and B. I've known the tune since at least the early 1960s but I previously used it for “The Cruel Mother” (I now sing a different version of that ballad). I picked up the melody aurally, but it is almost the same as that first printed in d'Urfey's *Pills to Purge Melancholy* (1719-20).

2. *The Elfin Knight.* This is an instance of a well-known song (“Scarborough Fair”) that derives from a ballad that is rarely sung in full. I took the words from Bruce & Stokoe's *Northumbrian Minstrelsy*, except that I sing “Scarborough” instead of “Whittingham”. It seems to be a broadside text, a variant of Child's version G, from *Gammer Gurton's Garland* (1810). The tune is *not* one of the fifty-five offered by Bronson but is very similar – although not quite identical – to the one that everybody knows from the Simon & Garfunkel recording. Paul Simon allegedly got it from Martin Carthy, and I may have done so too, since Carthy and the Watsons were quite frequent guests at Keele University folk club. To be truthful, I can't even remember when I first came upon it, but I know that it was several years before Simon popularized the song.

3. *The Fause Knight upon the Road.* The tune is very close to that given for “The Smart Schoolboy” in John Jacob Niles' *Ballad Book* (Niles #3) and some of the words are similar, but I got both text and tune from Dave. He can't remember where he learned them, but he thinks it was probably Keele or Stoke folk club in the mid-60s. Without checking this – sadly, we seem to have lost Dave's copy of the record – we guess that the version may be much the same as that employed by Steeleye Span on *Please to See the King* (1971), which would confirm that it was *au courant* in English folk clubs in the 1960s.

4. *Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight.* This is the ballad better known as “The Outlandish Knight”, and my text and tune both derive from *Northumbrian Minstrelsy*.

# Riddles Wisely Expounded



[www.canfolkmusic.ca/songs/issue39\\_1/Riddles\\_Wirely\\_Expounded.mp3](http://www.canfolkmusic.ca/songs/issue39_1/Riddles_Wirely_Expounded.mp3) <sup>Anon</sup>

There were three sist - ers fair and bright, Lay the bent to the  
bon - ny broom, And they three loved one val - iant knight, Fa la - la la la, la la  
la la la.

There were three sisters fair and bright,  
Lay the bent to the bonny broom,  
And they three loved one valiant knight,  
Fa la-la la la, la la, la la la.

The eldest sister let him in,  
Lay the bent, etc.,  
And barred the door with a silver pin,  
Fa la-la la la, etc.

The second sister made his bed,  
And placed soft pillows beneath his head.

The youngest sister, fair and bright,  
Resolved to wed this valiant knight.

“If you can answer questions three.  
O then, fair maid, I’ll marry thee.”

“What is louder than a horn,  
And what is sharper than a thorn?”

“Thunder is louder than a horn,  
And hunger is sharper than a thorn.”

“What is broader than the way,  
And what is deeper than the sea?”

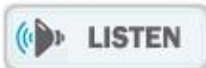
“Love is broader than the way,  
And Hell is deeper than the sea.”

“What is greener than the grass,  
And what is worse than a woman was?”

“Poison is greener than the grass,  
And the Devil is worse than e’er woman was.”

“You have answered my questions three,  
And now, fair maid, I’ll marry thee.”

## Scarborough Fair



[www.canfolkmusic.ca/songs/issue39\\_1/Scarborough\\_Fair.mp3](http://www.canfolkmusic.ca/songs/issue39_1/Scarborough_Fair.mp3)

Anon

Are you go - ing to Scar - borough Fair? Pars - ley, sage, rose -  
ma - ry and thyme. Re - mem - ber me to one who lives there, for  
she once was a true love of mine.

Are you going to Scarborough Fair?  
Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme.  
Remember me to one who lives there,  
For she once was a true love of mine.

Tell her to make me a cambric shirt,  
Parsley, sage, etc.,  
Without a seam or fine needle work,  
And then she'll be a true love of mine.

Tell her to wash it in yonder dry well,  
Where ne'er a drop of water e'er fell.

Tell her to dry it on yonder thorn,  
Which never bore blossom since Adam was born.

Now he has asked me questions three,  
Parsley, sage, etc.,  
I hope he will answer as many for me,  
For once he was a true lover of mine.

Tell him to find me an acre of land,  
Parsley, sage, etc.,  
Between the salt water and the sea sand,  
And then he'll be, etc.

Tell him to plough it with a ram's horn,  
And sow it all over with one peppercorn.

Tell him to reap it with a sickle of leather,  
And bind it up with one peacock's feather.

When he has done and finished his work,  
O tell him to come, and he'll have his shirt.

## The False Knight on the Road



LISTEN

[www.canfolkmusic.ca/songs/issue39\\_1/The\\_False\\_Knight\\_on\\_the\\_Road.mp3](http://www.canfolkmusic.ca/songs/issue39_1/The_False_Knight_on_the_Road.mp3)

Anon

Oh where are you go-ing said the false knight on the road, I'm  
going to my school said the child as he stood. And he stood and he stood, and 'twas  
well that he stood, I'm going to my school, said the child as he stood.

“Oh, where are you going?” said the false knight on the road,  
“I’m going to my school,” said the child as he stood,  
And he stood and he stood, and ‘twas well that he stood,  
“I’m going to my school,” said the child as he stood.

“Oh, what do you study there?” said the false knight on the road,  
“We learn the word of God,” said the child as he stood,  
And he stood and he stood, and ‘twas well that he stood,  
“We learn the word of God,” said the child as he stood.

“Oh, what have you got there?” said the false knight on the road,  
“I’m eating bread and cheese,” said the child as he stood,  
And he stood and he stood, and ‘twas well that he stood,  
“I’m eating bread and cheese,” said the child as he stood.

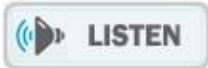
“Oh, won’t you give me some?” said the false knight on the road,  
“No, nare a bit nor crumb,” said the child as he stood,  
And he stood and he stood, and ‘twas well that he stood,  
“No, nare a bit nor crumb,” said the child as he stood.

“I wish you were in the sea,” said the false knight on the road,  
“With a good boat under me,” said the child as he stood,  
And he stood and he stood, and ‘twas well that he stood,  
“With a good boat under me,” said the child as he stood.

“I wish you were in the sands,” said the false knight on the road,  
“And a good staff in my hands,” said the child as he stood,  
And he stood and he stood, and ‘twas well that he stood,  
“And a good staff in my hands,” said the child as he stood.

“I think I hear a bell,” said the false knight on the road,  
“Aye, it’s ringing you to Hell,” said the child as he stood,  
And he stood and he stood, and ‘twas well that he stood,  
“It’s ringing you back to Hell,” said the child as he stood.

# The Outlandish Knight



[www.canfolkmusic.ca/songs/issue39\\_1/The\\_Outlandish\\_Knight.mp3](http://www.canfolkmusic.ca/songs/issue39_1/The_Outlandish_Knight.mp3)

Anon

An out - land - ish knight came from the North lands, And  
he came a - woo - in' to me, He told me he'd take me un-  
to the North lands, and there he would mar - ry me

An outlandish Knight came from the North lands, and he came a wooin' to me;  
He told me he'd take me unto the North lands, and there he would marry me.

'Come fetch me some of your father's gold, and some of your mother's fee,  
And two of the best nags out of the stable, where they stand thirty and three.'

She fetched him some of her father's gold, and some of her mother's fee;  
And two of the best nags out of the stable, where they stood thirty and three.

She mounted her on her milk-white steed, he on a dapple grey,  
They rode till they came unto the sea-side, three hours before it was day.

'Light off, light off, thy milk-white steed, and deliver it unto me!  
Six pretty maids have I drowned here, and thou the seventh shall be.

Pull off, pull off, thy silken gown, and deliver it unto me!  
Methinks it looks too rich and too gay to rot in the salt, salt sea.

Pull off, pull off, thy silken stays, and deliver them unto me;  
Methinks they are too fine and gay to rot in the salt, salt sea.

Pull off, pull off, thy Holland smock, and deliver it unto me;  
Methinks it looks too rich and gay to rot in the salt, salt sea.'

'If I must pull off my Holland smock, pray turn thy back to me,  
For it is not fitting that such a ruffian a naked woman should see.'

He turned his back towards her, and viewed the leaves so green;  
She caught him around the middle so small and tumbled him into the stream.

He dropped high, and he dropped low, until he came to the side –  
'Catch hold of my hand, my pretty maiden, and I will make you my bride.'

'Lie there, lie there, you false-hearted man, lie there instead of me!  
Six pretty maids have you drowned here, and the seventh has drowned thee.'

She mounted on her milk-white steed, and led the dapple grey;  
She rode till she came to her own father's hall, three hours before it was day.

The parrot being in the window so high, hearing the lady, did say,  
'I'm afraid that some ruffian has led you astray, that you've tarried so long away.'

'Don't prittle or prattle, my pretty parrot, nor tell no tales of me;  
Thy cage shall be made of the glittering gold, although now it is made of a tree.'

The king being in the chamber so high, and hearing the parrot, did say,  
'What ails you, what ails you, my pretty parrot, that you prattle so long before day?'

'It's no laughing matter,' the parrot did say, 'but so loudly I call unto thee;  
For the cats have got into the window so high, and I'm afraid that they will have me.'

'Well turned, well turned, my pretty parrot, well turned, well turned for me;  
Thy cage shall be made of the glittering gold, and the door of the best ivory.'

## Treasures from Our Archives

### *Fifteen Years Ago*

*Bulletin* 24.1 (June 1990). The first issue under the aegis of editor Lynn Whidden was a theme issue, appropriately enough given Lynn's expertise in the area of First Nations and Métis music. Lynn contributed "A Note on Métis Music" and "Native and Métis Songs from the SMEA Project"; and Anne Lederman did not stray from the field, authoring "'The Drops of Brandy': Several Versions of a Métis Fiddle Tune". The news column consisted of a collection of mini-articles on the Brandon Festival, NAFA, Tamarack, Nicole Beaudry's fieldwork, and a tribute to the late D.K. Wilgus by Edith Fowke.

### *Ten Years Ago*

*Bulletin* 29.1 (March 1995). The feature of this issue was a major memoir by Vera Johnson (who has since been made an Honorary Life Member of CSTM), "Genesis of a Folksinger/Songwriter"; a prodigious memory, copious notes and a penchant for getting into interesting places and situations gave us a very informative overview of Vera's life as a performer. Several of her songs, "The Bald Eagle", "The Fountain" and "Our 25th Birthday", accompanied the article. Several other songs made their appearance: "The Free Slave" from Edith Fowke's collection; Hilda Thomas's "The Condom Song", and "The Northwest Logger" by Hilda along with her husband, Phil; and "We're in the Same Boat Now" by no less a personage than former Ontario premier Bob Rae (he missed his calling...), accompanying "Rae-Day in Jaffa" by Judith Cohen. On a sadder note was an

obituary of CSTM director Hugh Hendry by Bill Sarjeant. Karen Bennett contributed an EthnoFolk Letter; the Centrefold column dealt with several magazines. Craig Mishler's book *The Crooked Stovepipe* was reviewed, as were recordings *Danses d'ici* (Jean-Pierre Joyal), *The Brule Boys in Paris* (Tickle Harbour), *One Evening as I Rambled* (Moirá Cameron), *Yellowknife Evening* (Ceilidh Friends), *Look to the Sea* (The Irish Descendants) and *Ain't Life Sweet* (Penny Lang).

### *Five Years Ago*

*Bulletin* 34.1/2 (March/June 2000). This was a double issue; I'll write about it next time.

These issues (and all back issues, either in original form or as photocopies) are available from CSTM Back Issues, 224 20th Ave. NW, Calgary, Alta. T2M 1C2.

See the Mail Order Service catalogue or the website ([www.yorku.ca/cstm](http://www.yorku.ca/cstm) and follow the links), or contact [john.leeder@nucleus.com](mailto:john.leeder@nucleus.com), for pricing.

*John Leeder*

## Two Songs

On the following pages you will find two songs that we recently discovered and admire very much: "The Old Songs' Home" by Shelley Posen, which is self-explanatory, and "Still the Song Lives On" by Clary Croft, which is about Helen Creighton. We thank Shelley and Clary for permission to print them.