

Singing the Child Ballads

Rosaleen Gregory

It has been a while since this column appeared, but I am glad we have space in this issue to resume the journey.

Child #86, “Young Benjie” and Child #92, “Bonny Bee Hom” (alias “The Lowlands of Holland”)

Both of these I sing unaccompanied, and both I learned from Stephen Sedley’s *The Seeds of Love* (Essex Music Limited in association with the English Folk Dance and Song Society, 1967). Sedley condenses his text of “Young Benjie” from a longer version in Scott’s *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1803), collated with a fragment printed by Buchan. The tune is from Albyn’s *Anthology* (1816), reprinted by Bernard Bronson. I have changed one or two words in the text (‘drowned’ instead of ‘dang’, ‘endure’ instead of ‘drie’, ‘ease’ instead of ‘scug’).

Sedley collates his text for “The Lowlands of Holland” from two mid-19th century broadsides, an early 19th century chapbook and a version collected by Cecil Sharp from Robert Dibble in Somerset. The tune is from Smith’s *Scottish Minstrel*. Basically, “The Lowlands of Holland” has become a separate, only shorter, song, linked to Child’s ‘A’ version of “Bonny Bee Hom” only by the inclusion in both of the lady’s declaration:

There shall no mantle cross my back, no comb go
through my hair,
Nor firelight nor candlelight shall ease my heart’s
despair.

In Child’s ballad, derived from Alexander Fraser Tytler’s Brown MS, the lady is at Bee Hom thinking that her lover is on his way to see her, but he is actually elsewhere entertaining another lady-love, which seems to me to be a different story altogether! The second lady gives the philandering gentleman a ring which will change colour if she dies or proves unfaithful, one of which eventually occurs, whereupon he, back at Bee Hom, dies too.

Child #95, “The Maid Freed from the Gallows”

My version is called “The Briery Bush”, and I worked out a simple guitar accompaniment to words and tune that I certainly knew as a child. Perhaps I learned this song at elementary school, in which case it’s likely to be a version collected by Cecil Sharp or Sabine Baring-Gould. I have an old fairy-tale book my grandfather gave me, the collection edited by folklorist Joseph Jacobs, containing a story called “The Golden Ball”, which tells a similar tale and has similar verses for the heroine at the gallows:

Stop, stop, I think I see my mother coming!
Oh mother, hast brought my golden ball
And come to set me free?

It has a similar happy ending, too.

Child #100, “Willie o’ Winsbury” (and “Thomas of Winesberry”) Unaccompanied.

I know two versions of this ballad, which is one of my favourites. “Thomas of Winesberry” I learned first; I knew it at University, but I can’t remember who, or where, I got it from.

Anne Briggs’ version of the same story is “Willie o’ Winsbury”, and I learned it from her 1971 Topic LP *Anne Briggs*, although I had heard her sing it at folk clubs during the previous decade. I was much intrigued recently to discover, when transcribing the tune, that it is the same as Sandy Denny of Fairport Convention’s “Farewell, farewell, all ye who live here/Ye lonely travellers all” – a totally different song written by Richard Thompson. It is the same tune – try it and see. I’ve been singing “Willie o’ Winsbury” and “Farewell, farewell” for years without realizing this.

“Thomas of Winesberry” is actually Child’s ‘H’ version, from Kinloch’s *Scottish Ballads* (tune and text), and “Willie o’ Winsbury” is his ‘A’ version, from Campbell MSS, but not one of the melodies supplied by Bronson is the one sung by Anne Briggs or Sandy Denny.

Young Benjie



www.canfolkmusic.ca/songs/issue41_2/Young_Benjie.mp3

Anon

Voice

Of all the maids of fair Scot-land, The fair-est was Mar-jor-ie, And young

Ben-jie was her own true love, And a dear true-love was he.

Of all the maids of fair Scotland,
The fairest was Marjorie,
And young Benjie was her own true love,
And a dear true love was he.

And woe but they were lovers dear
And loved full constantly,
But ay the more when they fell out
The sorer was their plea.

And they have quarreled on a day
Till Marjorie's heart grew woe,
And she said she'd choose another love
And let young Benjie go.

And he was stout and proud-hearted
And thought on't bitterly,
And he's gone by the wan moonlight
To meet his Marjorie.

Then soft she smiled and said to him,
"O what ill have I done?"
He took her in his arms two
And threw her o'er the linn.

The stream was strong, the maid was stout
And loth, loth to be drowned,
But ere she won the Lowden banks
Her fair colour it was wan.

Then up bespake her eldest brother:
"O see na you what I see?"
And out spake her second brother:
"It's our sister Marjorie."

Then they've ta'en up the comely corpse
And laid it on the ground,
"O who has killed our own sister,
And how can he be found?"

"The night it is her low lykewake,
The morn her burial day,
And we maun watch at murk midnight
And hear what she will say."

About the middle of the night
The cocks began to crow,
And at the dead hour of the night
The corpse began to throw.

"O who has done the wrong, sister,
Or dared the deadly sin?
Who was so stout and feared no dout
As throw you o'er the linn?"

"Young Benjie was the only man
That did my body win,
He was so stout and proud-hearted
He threw me o'er the linn."

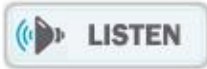
"Shall we young Benjie head, sister,
Shall we young Benjie hang?
Or shall we pike out his two grey een
And punish him ere he gang?"

"You mauna Benjie head, brothers,
You mauna Benjie hang,
But you maun pike out his two grey een
And punish him ere he gang."

"Tie a green gravat around his neck
And lead him out and in,
And the best ae servant about your house
To wait young Benjie on."

"And aye at every seven years' end
You'll take him to the linn,
For that's the penance he must endure
To ease his deadly sin."

The Lowlands of Holland



www.canfolkmusic.ca/songs/issue41_2/Lowlands_of_Holland.mp3

An on

Voice

The love that I have chos - en was to my heart's con - tent, The
salt sea shall be froz - en be - fore that I re - pent, Re - pent it I shall
ne - v - er un - til the day I die, But the low - lands of Hol - land have
part - ed my love and I.

The love that I have chosen was to my heart's content,
The salt sea shall be frozen before that I repent,
Repent it I shall never until the day I die,
But the lowlands of Holland have parted my love and I.

The very night we got married and lay upon our bed
A press-gang came to my bedside and stood at my bed-head,
Saying, "Arise, arise, you new-married man and come along with me
To the lowlands of Holland to face your enemy."

But Holland is a cold place, a place where grows no green,
But Holland is a cold place for my love to wander in,
Though money had been so plentiful as leaves grow on the tree,
Yet before I'd time to turn myself my love was stolen from me.

"Be still, be still, my daughter, what makes you to lament?
Is there ne'er a lad in our town can give your heart content?"
There's lads enough in our town but ne'er a one for me
For I never had but one true love and he was pressed from me.

There shall no mantle cross my back, no comb go through my hair,
No firelight nor candlelight shall ease my heart's despair,
And I will never married be until the day I die,
For the lowlands of Holland have parted my love and I.

The Briery Bush



www.canfolkmusic.ca/songs/issue41_2/The_Briery_Bush.mp3

Traditional

Voice

Hang - man stay ___ thy hand and stay it for a while, I
fancy - I see ___ my father com - ing A - cross ___ the yonder ___ stile. ___

O hangman, stay thy hand,
And stay it for a while,
For I fancy I see my *father coming
Across the yonder stile.

O have you brought me gold
Or jewels to set me free?
Or have you come to see me hung
Upon the gallows tree?

I have not brought you gold
Or jewels to set you free,
But I have come to see you hung
Upon the gallows tree.

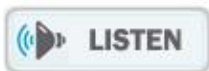
[NEXT SETS OF VERSES]
*Mother...brother... sister...

[LAST SET OF VERSES]
O hangman, stay thy hand,
And stay it for a while,
For I fancy I see my true love coming
Across the yonder stile.

O have you brought me gold
Or jewels to set me free?
Or have you come to see me hung
Upon the gallows tree?

Yes, I have brought you gold
And jewels to set you free:
I have not come to see you hung
Upon the gallows tree.

Willie o' Winsbury



www.canfolkmusic.ca/songs/issue41_2/Willie_OWinsbury.mp3

Traditional

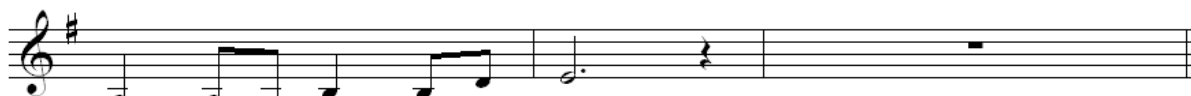
Voice



The king has been a — pris-on - er, And a pris - oner long



in — Spain. — And Wil - lie — of the — Wins - bur - y Full



long with his daught - er has lain.

The king has been a prisoner,
And a prisoner long in Spain,
And Willie of the Winsbury
Full long with his daughter has lain.

“What ails ye, what ails ye, my daughter Janet,
That you look so pale and wan;
Oh, have you had any sore sickness
Or yet been sleeping with a man?”

“I have not had any sore sickness
Nor yet been sleeping with a man;
It is for you, my father dear,
For biding so long in Spain.”

“Cast off, cast off your berry-brown gown,
You stand naked upon the stone,
That I may ken ye by your shape
Whether you be a maiden or none.”

And she's cast off her berry-brown gown,
She stood naked upon the stone;
Her belly was big and her haunches were round,
Her face was pale and wan.

“Oh, was it with a lord or a duke or a knight,
Or a man of birth and fame;
Or was it with one of those servingmen
That's lately come out of Spain?”

“No, it wasn't with a lord, nor a duke nor a knight,
Nor a man of birth or fame;
But it was with Willie of Winsbury –

I could bide no longer alone.”

And the king he has called on his merry men all,
By thirty and by three,
Says, “Fetch me this Willie of Winsbury,
For hanged he shall be.”

But when he came the king before
He was clad all in the red silk,
His hair was like the strands of gold,
His skin was as white as milk.

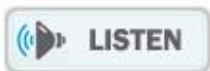
“And it is no wonder, said the king,
That my daughter's love you did win;
If I was a woman, as I am a man,
My bedfellow you would have been.

“And will you marry my daughter Janet
By the truth of your right hand?
Oh, will you marry my daughter Janet,
I'll make you the lord of my land?”

“Yes, I will marry your daughter Janet,
By the truth of my right hand;
Yes, I will marry your daughter Janet,
But I'll not take your land.”

And he's mounted her on a milk-white steed,
And himself on a dapple gray;
He has made her the lady of as much land
As she'll ride in a long summer's day.

Thomas of Winesberry



www.canfolkmusic.ca/songs/issue41_2/Thomas_of_Winesberry.mp3

Traditional

Voice

Oh, it - fell up-on a day when the bold king of France Went a -
 hunt - ing for five months or more... That his daught - er fell in love with
 Thomas of Wines - ber-ry, From Scot - land new - ly come o'er... from
 Scot - land - new - ly come o'er [last verse]

It fell upon a time when the bold king of France
 Went a-hunting for five months or more,
 That his daughter fell in love with Thomas of Winesberry,
 From Scotland newly come o'er,
 From Scotland newly come o'er.

When the king he did return from a-hunting the deer,
 And his daughter before him did come,
 Her belly it was big and her two sides were round,
 And her fair colour it was wan,
 And her fair colour it was wan.

“O daughter, O daughter, O daughter, said the king,
 What makes you look so wan?
 You have either been sick, and very, very sick,
 Or else you have lain with a man,
 Or else you have lain with a man.

“O is it a man, and a man of might,
 Or is it a man of means,
 Or is it aye one of those rank rovers
 That I lately sent home for his pains,
 That I lately sent home for his pains?”

“O it isna a man, and a man of might,
 Nor is it a man of means,
 But it is Thomas of Winesberry,

And for him I would suffer pain,
 And for him I would suffer pain.”

When this bonny lad was brought before the king,
 His clothing was made of the silk,
 And his fine yellow hair was hanging down,
 And his skin it was like to the milk,
 And his skin it was like to the milk.

“Nae wonder, nae wonder, nae wonder, said the king,
 That my daughter fell in love with thee,
 For were I a woman, as I am a man,
 Thy bedfellow I would be,
 Thy bedfellow I would be.

“O will ye marry my daughter Janet,
 By the truth of thy right hand?
 O will ye marry my daughter Janet,
 And be heir to all my land,
 And be heir to all my land?”

“O aye, I’ll marry your daughter Janet,
 But I’ll not take your land;
 For she will be a queen, as I shall be a king,
 When we come to fair Scotland,
 When we come to fair Scotland.”