

Sheila Stewart

Scottish Traveller, Traditional Singer and Storyteller

1935 - 2014

by Pete Shephard

“...one of Scotland’s finest traditional singers, inheriting a rich oral culture of songs, ballads and folk tales that had survived as a living tradition among the Scottish Travellers...”



Photo courtesy of Topic Records

Sheila Stewart, who died in December aged 79, was one of Scotland’s finest traditional singers, inheriting a rich oral culture of songs, ballads and folk tales that had survived as a living tradition among the Scottish Travellers. Last of the famous Perthshire Traveller family, The Stewarts of Blair, her father Alex Stewart, piper and storyteller, matriarch Belle Stewart and her two daughters, Sheila and Cathie, were welcomed by the folk revival of the 1960s and the family became well-known performers

on the folk scene in Scotland and England, in Europe and the United States.

In 1976, Sheila was invited to perform at the United States bicentennial celebrations in Washington, DC, where she met the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh who expressed disappointment at not hearing her sing. Several hours later, she was whisked off to the White House where President Gerald Ford, the Queen and Prince Philip enjoyed

her songs and Scottish ballads. In 1982, Sheila was chosen to represent underprivileged communities in Scotland and sing for Pope John Paul II in front of more than 350,000 people in Bellahouston Park, Glasgow, where her performance of Ewan MacColl’s song about Travellers, *The Moving-On Song*, was a triumph. The next day, the newspaper reported that only two things silenced the crowd – the arrival of the Pope and Sheila’s singing.

“...Where would the ballad singing tradition in Scotland be today without the unbroken continuity of tradition passed on to us by Sheila and other members of Scotland’s ancient Traveller community...”

The family was first brought to light by Blairgowrie journalist Maurice Fleming in 1954 following a chance meeting with folklorist Hamish Henderson in Edinburgh. Discovering that Hamish had recently been appointed as a research fellow at the School of Scottish Studies, Maurice enthused about the weekly BBC Radio Programme, *As I Roved Out*, presented by Peter Kennedy with field recordings of English traditional singers, and wondered whether a similar programme could be produced in Scotland. Hamish had already discovered the wealth of traditional balladry held by the Scottish Traveller community and, a year earlier in 1953, Hamish had been led to the door of Jeannie Robertson in Aberdeen to discover a singer who exceeded all his expectations and who he considered as the most outstanding discovery of the century. For Hamish, who had been brought up in the Perthshire glens, Blairgowrie was home territory. He had recently recorded a song, *The Berryfields Of Blair*, from John MacDonald, the ‘Singing Molecatcher’ of Pitgaveny in Morayshire – a song that celebrated the annual berrypicking when Travellers from far and wide gathered in the area to pick the harvest of strawberries and raspberries. In the words of the song:

*When berry time comes roond each year, Blair’s population’s swellin,
There’s every kind o picker there and every kind o dwellin;
There’s tents and huts and caravans, there’s bothies and there’s bivvies,
And shelters made wi tattie-bags and dug-outs made wi divvies.*

*There’s travellers fae the Western Isles, fae Arran, Mull and Skye,
Fae Harris, Lewis and Kyles o Bute, they come their luck to try;
Fae Inverness and Aberdeen, fae Stornoway and Wick,
Aa flock to Blair at the berry time, the straws and rasps to pick.*

The full song can be heard as sung by Belle at the Kinross Festival in 1972 (recorded by Peter R Cooke for the School of Scottish Studies) on the Tobar an Dualchais / Kist O Riches website.

When Hamish and Maurice met in Edinburgh, it was already June and the Travellers would be gathering in Blairgowrie so, discovering Maurice Fleming’s enthusiasm and that he was a Blairgowrie man, he gave Maurice a list of songs to look for and, in particular, suggested he try to discover who had composed the *Berryfields Of Blair* song.

Returning the next day to Blair, Maurice asked among the Travellers and was told he should

look for the Stewarts who rented berry fields at the Standing Stones at Essendy. So he cycled up to Essendy and it was Sheila Stewart he met (just 18 years old at the time) who immediately said she knew the song and told Maurice it had been written by her mother Belle. Maurice reported the news back to Hamish and, with recording equipment brought from Edinburgh, the rich repertoire of songs was soon filling up the reels of tape. The recordings made that June and July and the following summer of 1955 were then issued on an LP, *Songs And Music From The Berryfields Of Blair* (Prestige International 25016) produced by Kenneth Goldstein in the USA. In the sleeve notes Hamish makes what has become a famous quote about the rich tradition of the Scottish Travellers that “recording in the berryfields was like holding a tin-can under the Niagara Falls.”

Sheila was five when she learnt her first song and her singing became a regular feature of family gatherings. When Maurice Fleming first visited the family he remembered Sheila had her own notebook of songs and that she was quite clear which songs were the ones she sang and which were those sung by her mother and sister Cathie. It was only after both her sister and her mother Belle had passed on that she added some of ‘their’ songs to her repertoire. Although steeped in

Traveller lore and balladry from all sides of her family, and learning songs from her mother, some of the most interesting, and oldest, songs in her repertoire came from Belle’s brother, her uncle, Donald MacGregor, who carefully taught her the ballads. Donald could neither read nor write, but was an exacting teacher when it came to songs and he would not let her sing a ballad in front of the family until she had it the way he wanted. What became Sheila’s most famous ballad was one of those taught her by Donald – *The Twa Brothers*:

*Two pretty boys were going tae the school,
And one evening comin home;
Said William tae John, “Can you throw a stone,
Or can you play at a ball,
Or can you play at a ball?”*

*Said William tae John, “I cannot throw a stone,
Or little can I play at a ball;
But if you come tae yon merry green woods
I’ll try you a wrestling fall,
I’ll try you a wrestling fall.”*

*So they come doun tae yon merry green woods,
Beneath the spreading moon;
And the little penknife slipped out of William’s pocket,
And gave John his deadly wound,
And gave John his deadly wound.*



Sheila, Belle and Jane Turriff. Photo: Alistair Chafer

The full ballad can be heard sung by Sheila (as recorded by Peter R Cooke at Blairgowrie Festival in 1970) on the Tobar an Dualchais / Kist O Riches website.

A notable characteristic of Sheila's style was what the family described as "having the conyach" (from the Gaelic caoineach, weeping or keening) – the gift for conveying the emotional feeling of a ballad that Hamish compared to the "duende" of Andalusian flamenco song – which was evident in her execution of many of her songs and notably in the ballad of *The Twa Brothers* taught by her uncle, Donald.

Sheila was born on 7 July 1935 in a stable behind the Angus Hotel at Blairgowrie, Perthshire, after an argument between her mother and grandmother had rendered her parents homeless. Her mother Belle had been born in a tent beside the Tay and the family was accustomed to the Traveller way of life, surviving through hawking, besom-making and seasonal farm work. Her father Alex dealt in scrap metal and took seasonal farm work but his great pleasure was fresh-water pearl fishing and piping – often busking at the Devil's Elbow in the summer time on the road to Braemar. Sheila often worked with her mother and other family members at the berrypicking, tattie howking and flax harvesting and also was adept at the pearl fishing. In latter years, she was happy to show the glass bottomed container used for seeing into the water to select the right fresh water mussel that could hide a treasured pearl.

In 1956, she married her husband Ian MacGregor who died in 1977 while fishing in the Ericht above Blairgowrie. Sheila moved for a while to Dundee and travelled with her children Ian, Hamish and Heather down to England to work at the apple picking. In Sheffield, she worked as a Traveller Liaison Officer and on returning to Scotland she settled in Rattray.

In her early life, Sheila had encountered discrimination and prejudice, but she and her family found nothing but respect from folk music enthusiasts for their classic songs and ballads. In the 1960s, when the family lived in a row of houses at Wellbank, New Alyth, they were visited by

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Photo courtesy of Topic Records

musicologists from the USA and by young folk singers from far and wide. I remember one occasion in 1963 when visiting Alex and Belle's house we were welcomed "ben the hoose" and soon there was a gathering with Sheila and Cathie and the grandchildren with songs all around and Alex telling some wonderful ancient, supernatural folk tales. Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger visited the family several times and invited them to perform at the Singer's Club in London and made extensive recordings of their songs, tales and their life story that they later published as *Till Doomsday In The Afternoon* (1986). The Stewart family were enthusiastic supporters of the proposal from myself and Jimmy Hutchison and others from the St Andrews Folk Club to run a traditional song and music festival in Blairgowrie and, in August 1966, the family were the effective hosts of the first Blairgowrie Festival with guests that included the finest traditional singers of the day – Jeannie Robertson, Donald and Isaac Higgins, old Davie Stewart, Jimmy MacBeath and Willie Scott – the festival run at the berrypicking time so as to ensure the participation of Travellers who were in Blair for the season. Folk enthusiasts arrived at the event from all over Scotland, from England and from Ireland and the success of the event led the following Spring to the founding of the Traditional Music and Song Association of Scotland with the

festival continuing for a further four years before moving to Kinross.

Sheila's mother Belle, who died in 1997, was awarded the British Empire Medal for services to traditional music and Sheila was honoured with an MBE in 2006. The Stewarts of Blair were made Honorary Members of the Traditional Music and Song Association in 1971 and Sheila was inducted into the Traditional Music Hall of Fame in 2007.

In 2006 Sheila's biography of her mother was published by Birlinn in Edinburgh under the title *The Queen Among The Heather* – the name of one of Belle's favourite songs and a title that had become applied to Belle herself. This was followed in 2008 by a collection of Travellers' Tales, *Pilgrims Of The Mist*, and in 2011 by her autobiography, *A Traveller's Life*. Recordings of Sheila are on a family album, *The Stewarts Of Blair* (1965) on Topic Records and a solo album, *From The Heart Of The Tradition* was issued in 2000. She is also on several recordings made at the annual Fife Traditional Singing Festival. Like her mother before her, Sheila was always keen to encourage young song and music enthusiasts and in 2003 she sang for Martyn Bennett in the production of his computer produced album *GRIT*, issued on Real World Records.

Where would the ballad singing tradition in Scotland be today

without the unbroken continuity of tradition passed on to us by Sheila and other members of Scotland's ancient Traveller community. I well remember how she won the traditional singing cup at the very first TMSA competitions held during the Blairgowrie Festival of 1969 – so setting the standard for other singers to follow – with her magnificent family version of the ancient ballad *The Twa Brothers*.

Sheila had recently been troubled by back pain, suffered kidney failure and died on Tuesday 9 December 2014 in Ninewells Hospital in Dundee. She is survived by her children Ian, Hamish, Heather and Gregor, as well as 13 grandchildren.

Belle Stewart:
The Berryfields O Blair
www.goo.gl/6M7vIG

Sheila Stewart:
The Twa Brothers
www.goo.gl/SKzW8d

Sheila Stewart:
Topic: *From The Heart Of The Tradition*
www.goo.gl/P8wOrp

Fife Traditional Singing Festival:
Old Songs & Bothy Ballads
www.goo.gl/maq459

Martyn Bennett:
GRIT with Sheila's singing of *Move*
www.goo.gl/jyaHsV

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