

History of Portsoy

JIMMY McBEATH (SCOUT)

FOLKSINGER

1898 - 1972

Researched by Findlay Pirie



Jimmy McBeath

Jimmy McBeath

From the Press and Journal, Saturday, January 8th, 1972: -

**NORTH-EAST FOLK SINGER DIES.
JIMMY MCBEATH WAS 'KING O' THE CORNKISTERS'.**

Scotland's best known ballad singer, Jimmy McBeath, died yesterday in Tor-na-Dee Hospital, Milltimber, Aberdeenshire. He was in his late 70's. Although an international figure in the folk-singing field, the kenspeckle Portsoy born singer lived in relative poverty at Aberdeen's model lodging-house until he was admitted to hospital.

Born and brought up on North-East farms he became well known for singing unaccompanied at farms and fairs, and achieved international fame in the early 50's performing regularly until three years ago when his health restricted his appearances.

Arthur Argo writes: - "In an era where conformity is continually encroaching on individuality, the countryside can ill do with the loss of colourful personalities like Jimmy McBeath. To say that he had tucked away in his mind an apparently limitless store of lore, language, legend and song is true. But it is not enough. He was also a man of great warmth.

In his youth he sang at fee'in markets throughout the length and breadth of Scotland. In middle age he was discovered by Hamish Henderson of the School of Scottish Studies at Edinburgh University and introduced to Alan Lomax the great American folk authority. From then to his old age he was revered by many of the young singers and enthusiasts on the folk scenes of the world.

In all that time it can be said that he made thousands of friends. In contrast I can think of no one who had an unkind word to say about the 'King o' the Corkisters'.

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From the Press and Journal, Monday, January 10th. 1972: -

DEATH NOTICE - MCBEATH - At Tor-na-Dee Hospital, Milltimber, on Thursday January 6th. 1972 (Scout), son of the late Mr. and Mrs. James McBeath, sometime of Portsoy. Funeral on Monday, January 10th. to Portsoy Cemetery to arrive approximately 1.15 p.m. All friends respectfully invited.

Notes: -Jimmy McBeath was born in Church Street, Portsoy on 30th. August 1898.

His 'home base' for the first half of his life was the lodging-house at the Old Harbour, Portsoy, which was situated close to Church Street, his birthplace. A friendly and sociable man, (known familiarly as "Scout") he was a "weel kent" figure on the Shorehead and could often be seen in conversation with the locals who lived in that part of the town. After World War II the lodging-houses in the area began to close down and Jimmy was forced to move from Portsoy to Banff, then to Elgin and finally to Aberdeen.

Jimmy sang on the radio and appeared on TV, and in the Local History department of the Central Library in Aberdeen there is a plaque on display to his memory.

Jimmy McBeath

From the internet: -

Jimmy McBeath

Banffshire "supertramp" singer & storyteller (1894-1972)

Was born at Portsoy, Banffshire. At the age of 13 he was hired at Brandane's Fair to work on a farm in the parish of Deskford and received £4 for his first "haflin" and 5 guineas for the second half of the year. Although he tried his hand at many jobs, he was happiest as a beggar on the open road. In his later years, though previously a bit shy at singing in the streets, he became known as one of the last singers of "The Cornkisters" or "Bothy Ballads". He travelled much of Scotland, Ireland and England and also went to the Channel Islands and to Canada, and his Army Service took him to Egypt. During the sixties he performed at a number of folk clubs and festivals including the first Keele Folk Festival. Jimmy first became known to Hamish Henderson in the summer of 1951 and some of these recordings were made then. Two years later he was invited to London to take part in David Attenborough's "Ballad Hunter" series on TV at Alexandra Palace, when further recordings were made by Peter Kennedy and Alan Lomax.

Further information about him can be found in TOCHER No. 12 (1973) Alan Lomax described him as "Quick-footed, sporty little character, with the gravel voice and urbane assurance that would make him right at home on skid row anywhere in the world. He's been everywhere and nowhere for fifty years running and he has a song about it", — rec by AL & HH, Edinburgh 6/7/51: RPL 21533 "Van Dieman's Land", "McPherson's Lament1* & "Awa tae the scap"! 21538 "Barnyards o Delgaty" - COLUMBIA SL-207 1952/ ROUNDER CD-1743 1998 "Come all ye Tramps & Hawkers" -

RTR#0683 (Edinburgh Ceilidhe) - rec by Seamus Ennis, Portsoy, Banffsh 5-7/7/52: FTX=260: RPL 18126-8 & 18130-1 incl "Sleepy Toon o Kennethmont" "Lads that had the plough" "Bonny Lass o Fyvie" "Miles & Road to Dundee" "Cow with the Iron Tail" "Erin-go-bragh" "Airlin's Fine Braes" "Sour Milk Cairt"! rec by SE 5-7/7/52: RPL 18132-3 (now remade as RPL LP 26506) "Drumallachie" "Forfar Soldier" "Corrachree" "Banks of Inverurie" "Guise o Tough" & "Laddie wi the dark & rolling eye" - rec by SE 6/7/52: RPL 18777 incl "Nicky Tarns" "Labouring Baker" "Bonny Irish boy" & "Calder's Clear Stream" (frag) - FDXtQ15 "My Darling Ploughman Boy" • FTX-019 "Grat for Gruel" - FTX^Q23 "Muckin o Geordie's Byre" & "Van Dieman's Land" - FTX_-Q31 "Bogie's Bonny Belle" & "Next Pudden Ken" - FTX-058 / FTX-059/ FJDXtOJSO/ 3 vols documentary -J60 solo Bothy Ballads - FJO^SOI mouth music - FJX441 Tinker cant: "Next Pudden Ken" • FTX-460 Bothy Ballads with others - FJDC-5Q2 "Braes oYarrow" - FTX-503 "Eppie Morrie" "Keach in the Creel" "Trooper and the Maid" - FJTX=514 "Down by the Magdalen Green" - FTX-515 "The Fisherman's Wife" - FTX-5J7 "The Forfar Sodger" - COLLECTOR (USA) CLE-1201 rec by Jean Ritchie incl "Cuckoo's Nest" - EMBER FA-2055 1968 "Grat for Gruel" -(JAZZ) COLLECTOR JES.10 1959 "Tramps & Hawkers/Nickie Tarns/Moss o'Burreldales/Gallant Forty-Twa" - TANGENT TNGM-109 1971 "Muckin o Geordie's" & "Whistle over the lave ot" - TNGM-119/D 1975 "Keach in the Creel" & "Broom o the Cowdenknowes" - TOPIC 12-T-173 1967 " Wild Rover" solo album:- 2nd album: 12 T 303 1978 "Bound to be a row" (CASS-0193)/ TSCD-651 1998 (courtship & marriage) "The Bonny Lass o Fyvie"! TSCD-655 Rural "Nicky Tarns" & "Barnyards o Delgaty"! TSCD-657 Fun & Frolics "You canna put

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it on to Sandy"! TSCD-660 Amorous Encounters "Bold English Navvy" & "The Wind blew the bonny lassie's plaidie awa"! TSCD-664 Dances & Ditties "Highland Rory" & "Johnny McIndoe"! TSCD-665 Courtship "I'm a stranger to this Country" (modernised "Indian Lass" changed to "Old Scottish Lass")/ TSCD-670 Farmwork: "Come all you Tramps and Hawkers" & "Airlin's Fine Braes"

From the book "Alias MacAlias" by Hamish Henderson, published by Polygon, 22, George Square Edinburgh in 1992: -

JIMMY McBEATH.

Pages 161 - 166

Jimmy MacBeath, last 'King of the Cornkisters', was born in Portsoy in 1898 and died in Tor-na-Dee Hospital, Aberdeenshire, on 7th. January 1972.

Like his friend and travelling companion, Davie Stewart, Jimmy spent the greater part of his life as a wandering singer, and his travels took him to every corner of the North-East, and (in his heyday) as far as Stornoway, Belfast, the Channel Islands and Canada. Like Davie again, he became one of the few 'professionals' of an earlier period to find a rather wobbly but welcome place in the ranks of the entertainers who have been doing the rounds of folk club and festival since the present Revival go under way in the late 1950's and he was a familiar kenspeckle figure at Blairgowrie, Keele, Loughborough, and Cecil Sharp House. Although his last years were spent in relative poverty - he was for a decade an inmate of the model lodging-house at 33 East North Street, Aberdeen - this new lease of fame and the occasional paid gig did do something to ease an existence that in the end must often have been hard to thole.

We have a description of Jimmy as a schoolboy from an informant who was in the same class at Portsoy School. Jimmy, whose nickname was "Scout" sat at the bottom of the class with another lad by-named Piggy, and 'made fun of his lessons'. However, he had already begun to store songs and rhymes in his retentive memory, as I discovered when I began to record the fragments of nursery rhymes, playground songs and harvest field gallimaufries which are related to the 'dreg song' of the Lothian and Fife oyster-fishers, and which can still be found here and there, sometimes far from their region of origin. Jimmy listened with interest to the recording of dreg-song fragments and contributed a version of his own which he had learned in the playground of Portsoy School: -

Mary Annie, sugar cannie
Bumbee bedlar
Saxteen saidler
A mannie in a hair caipie
Rowin' at the fairy (?ferry) boatie.
Fairy boatie ow'r dear,
Ten pounds in the year.
Jock Fife had a coo
Black and white about the moo.
Hit can jump the Brig o' Dee
Singin' Cock-a-linkie.

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Jimmy heard this version when he was eight from a "laddie cried Mair" who also became a farm servant. The 'mannie in the hairy caipie' recalls the lines in Herd's eighteenth-century version: -

Hey hou Harry Harry
Mony a boat skail'd the ferry.

and maybe provides a hint that the horsemen were not the only workers in Scotland to invoke the occasional aid of Hairy, alias Cloutie.

Jimmy learned the 'bothy style' - the way of life of the farm servants of the pre-First World War North-East - the hard way. He left school at thirteen and was fee'd at Brandane's Fair to a farm in the parish of Deskford, south of Cullen in Banffshire. His fee for the first six-month term was £4; this was raised to five guineas for a second term. His most vivid memory of that first year was a savage beating with the back chain of a cart for not being in proper control of the horses: 'Ye ca'd oot much wi' your pair at that time, ye used your pair at that time. The foreman went oot first, and of course I was oot ahin', man; I happened til miss my hin'-sling, o' my cairt, like - and the horse gaed agley, dae ye see. He (the foreman) pulled me oot-ow'r the cairt and thrashed me with a back chain - richt ow'r the back wi' a back chain. An' the fairmer was passin' at the time, and never lookit near hand.'

That punishment, meted out to a greenhorn 'halflin' does not seem to have been exceptional. Other informants such as Jimmy Stewart (a Turriff worthy known as the Laird o' Delgaty) have recorded similar stories for our archive. No wonder Jimmy Macbeath described the North-East farm servants of that period as 'a very sad-crushed people, very sair crushed doon'. Conditions of work, living accommodation and the food (generally brose) provided for the lads were all the subject of outspoken complaint in bothy ballads, and when Jimmy sang 'Drumdelgie' to audiences far outside the North-East, he was able to communicate more of the immediate reality of a farm labourer's life in the old days than a hundred Government papers or bureaucratic reports could possibly have done.

The outbreak of World War 1 did, at any rate, provide a chance of a break from this 'hard slavery work'. Jimmy enlisted in the Gordons, and saw service in the trenches of France and Flanders. He also spent some time in Ireland with the RAMC and helped to plant several bothy ballads in the rich fertile soil of Kildare.

When he was demobilised, he was faced with the depressing prospect of re-entering farm service, but fate - in the shape of Geordie Stewart of Huntly, a wealthy travelling scrap dealer, and a brother of Lucy Stewart of Fetterangus - willed otherwise. Geordie was a connoisseur of ballad singing, and it was he who put the idea into Jimmy's head that he might be better employed using his by-ordinar voice, with its unique gravelly tone, as a street singer than meekly submitting to the necessity of a return to the bothy life. Geordie not only assured Jimmy that fame, money and a great lyric future lay before him on the road; he also taught him two or three dozen of the songs which he was afterwards to make famous, including the best version collected to date of "Come a' ye Tramps and Hawkers'.

At first Jimmy seems to have been rather self-conscious about singing on the streets, especially in places where he was known. The same school-friend of Jimmy, whom I quoted earlier, happened by accident to come on him at the very outset of his career, when he was singing in the streets in Banff. As soon as his compatriot appeared Jimmy took one look at him, stopped in mid-song and moved off. But it was not long before he had that awkward hurdle behind him and was fully prepared to sing anywhere, and on any occasion, at the drop of a hat - or the crack of a nicky tam. He became a welcome 'weel kent face' at all sorts of

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events, public and private, in Aberdeenshire - from Aikey Fair to a local football team celebration. Mr. McKenzie of McKenzie's tea-rooms in Elgin (where Jimmy was later to work as a kitchen porter in the mid 1950's) informed me that it was not uncommon for Jimmy to earn as much as £25 in a single day, when he was on top of his form, and this was naturally quite a lot of money in the 1920s and '30s. But money always flowed through Jimmy's hands like water; he spent quite a lot on booze, and was always ready to 'stand his hand' in company, but he was also an impulsively - one might say compulsively - generous person and had a real sympathy with those who happened to be less fortunate than himself - as anyone can testify who ever saw him together with blind people.

The time of the year when Jimmy really came into his own was Aikey Fair, the famous 'Continental Sunday' Fair which is held in July on a brae not far from Old Deer, and in sight of Drostan's Abbey. (Aikey Brae was the locality of the final defeat of the Comyns by Robert Bruce in 1308.) This used to be a celebrated horse market (held on a Wednesday) but with the gradual disappearance of the horse as a working beast on North-East farms, this side of the Fair faded out. However, the Sunday Fair is still a great occasion, and attracts singers, pipers, fiddlers, melodeon players and other wandering folk artists - the majority of them 'travelling people' from all over the North-East, and even further afield. There are also revivalist preachers who occasionally have at tough time of it if the musicians feel like drowning their fire and brimstone by the direct method. When Jimmy McBeath turned up, he at once became the centre of a lively group of farm servants, who urged him to sing 'The Banks of Ross-shire', 'Torn a', rippit a', 'The Ball o' Kirriemeer' and other colourful items from his repertoire. (In this he seems to have been in the direct line of descent from blind Jamie Rankin, the singer Peter Buchan employed to collect songs and stories for him - cf. Gavin Grieg and Alexander Keith, *Last Leaves*, pp279-80.)

Afterwards Jimmy would repair to a hotel bar in Old Deer, and the fun would continue. I remember well seeing him in his glory in that same bar in the evening of the Fair Day in 1953; one of the young farm servants, who had obviously formed a strong attachment to him, was sitting and listening attentively, while Jimmy taught him 'Airlin's Fine Braes' verse by verse. I felt it was a real privilege to witness the actual act of oral transmission, especially when the transmitter was none other than the reigning 'King of the Cornkisters'.

Jimmy also used to sing at 'Turra Market' (Porter Fair), and it was in Turriff that Alan Lomax and I made our first recordings of him in 1951. The lead that carried us to Jimmy came from 'Lordie' Hay, a veteran bothy singer whom I had met on an earlier tour. This was the same humorous blue-blooded 'Lordie', brother of 'Princie', who is mentioned in the bothy ballad 'Wester Badentee': -

Syne Lordie wi the auld Scotch sangs nae heard in music halls.

We recorded a number of songs from him in the Commercial Hotel in Turriff; in addition, he provided a graphic account of the career and personality of Jimmy MacBeath, and obligingly told us where we could probably find him; this turned out to be the North Lodge, a model lodging-house in Elgin.

The following day we drove west from Turriff, via Banff and Buckie. Alan dropped me off at Jessie Murray's house in Buckie, and drove on alone to Elgin to pick up Jimmy. Jessie, a great ballad singer, was in rare fettle and I hardly noticed the two hours go by, when suddenly I heard Alan's car draw up in front of the house. A moment or two later, Jessie and I had a simultaneous first vision of Jimmy's beaming, rubicund, booze-blotched face as he walked into the kitchen, followed by Alan. There was a moment of silence. Then Alan said; 'Hamish...Jessie.... I want you to meet Jimmy MacBeath'

Half an hour later we were *en route* for Turriff and Jimmy was singing in the back of the car. To start the ball rolling, I had sung him a short four-verse variant of 'Come a' ye

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Tramps and Hawkers' which I had learned from a Dundee-born farm servant Tam MacGregor when I was a student. (Tam and I had been 'chaulmered' together on an Appin farm, and I learned several songs from him in the authentic style, when we were lying on adjacent bone-shaker beds). Jimmy at once sang his own version, now world famous, and we were away.

When he learned that we were heading for 'Turra toon', Jimmy was none too confident of his reception. The last time he had been there, he had been slung out of the town by the local police, who had told him never to set foot in Turriff again. However, Alan assured him that this was a 'special case' - as indeed it was - and Jimmy rode back into Turra in triumph. He was shortly taking his ease, and a royal dram, in the best hotel in the town. Indeed Jimmy, who was never slow to claim descent from the Macbeth who 'stabbed King Duncan through the mattress' - and, given any encouragement, from the best-looking of the three Weird Sisters too - was quick to realise that here, in the shape of two wandering folklorists, was fate in a Ford Anglia, and that his reappearance (against all the odds) in Turra Toon signified a qualitative change in more than his own personal picturesque career. Those early recording sessions in the Commercial Hotel marked the intersection in space and time of the old world of Aikey Fair and the new world of the as yet undreamed - of Keele Festival for the future, with its hundreds of youthful enthusiasts from all over Britain gathered to hear Flora McNeil, Ewan McColl, Margaret Barry, Felix Doran, Belle and Alex Stewart - and Jimmy MacBeath himself, the symbolic factor in the whole clanjamfrie.

So in the Turriff hotel bedroom which I was shortly to re-occupy when Edinburgh University finally 'bought' the idea of subsidising a collecting tour, Jimmy really went to town. He gave an uproarious performance of 'The Moss of Burreldales', the song which epitomises the Scots tinker way of life; he delighted us with a lovely rendering of the 'Forfar Sodger' complete with gesticulations; he put on gallus re-hackled swagger for 'The Gallant Forty-Twa'; and, after telling us the story of James McPherson, the tinker-gypsy outlaw hanged at Banff in November 1700, he went on to sing the folk version of 'McPherson's Rant' which was shortly to supplant the Robert Burns's cloak-and-dagger re-write on the lips of folk-singers all over Scotland.

Later that summer Jimmy came to Edinburgh to sing at the first People's Festival ceilidh organised by me for the Edinburgh Labour Festival Committee. This was held in the Oddfellows' Hall, just across the road from Sandy Bell's bar and in both places Jimmy created a sensation. His first song in the hall was 'Come a' ye Tramps and Hawkers', and Alan Lomax's tape-recordings of the ceilidh communicate the elated atmospheres of that memorable occasion. Jimmy was much affected by the reception he got, and at the end of the show he informed the audience that this was his 'swan-song', the culmination and the conclusion of his singing career; for reasons of ill-health and age he would never be able to sing at a similar function again. (He was to visit Edinburgh and sing at my ceilidhs for close on another twenty years.)

After the official ceilidh had finished, we carried on in St. Columba's Church Hall in Johnstone Terrace, and there Jimmy excelled himself. Ewan McColl and Isla Cameron joined us, the Theatre Workshop show having finished, and the sight of Ewan's face, when he first received the full impact of Jimmy's personality and performance, remains vividly in my memory. Other singers and musicians present were, Flora McNeil, Calum Johnstone, John Burgess, Jessie Murray, Blanche Wood and John Strachan. Hugh MacDiarmid honoured us with his presence; parts of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* were spoken during the evening, and at the end of a second or 'unofficial' part of the show he was so moved that he publicly embraced old John Strachan after the singing of 'Goodnight and Joy be wi' ye a'.

We had two valuable allies in London, however; these were Peter Kennedy and Seams Ennis, who at that time made up a small folk-song section in the BBC, under the aegis of

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Marie Slocombe. After the second People's Festival in 1952, I brought Seamus Ennis to the North-East, and in the Royal Oak Hotel, Banff, we recorded some wonderful sessions with Jimmie, 'Lordie', Frank Steele and other singers. The BBC discs made from these tape-recordings gradually began to get heard on the radio even in programmes put out by BBC Scotland - although the latter showed a curious reluctance, literally for years, to use Jimmy and the other authentic bothy ballad singers to anything like the extent to which they could - and should - have been used.

It was in 1953 that Alan Lomax invited Jimmy to London, to take part in his first television series presenting folk-singers from Scotland, Ireland and England, and it is from his appearance in this series - which was commented on - that one can really date Jimmy as an international celebrity on the folk scene. This was further enhanced by the appearance in 1954 of Volume VI (Scotland) of the Columbia Albums of Folk and Primitive Song, which I helped Alan to edit. Later records which featured his singing include the Caedmon Series of 'Folksongs of Britain' (issued in Britain by Topic), and our own Bothy Ballads LP on the Tangent label. In 1960 Collector brought out an EP of his singing (JES10); recordings had been made at the Linburn Ceilidhs for War Blinded, organised by the School of Scottish Studies, and in 1968 Topic produced an LP (*Wild Rover no More, 12T173*) edited by Peter A. Hall.

The festivals organised by the Traditional Music and Song Association of Scotland at Blairgowrie and Kinross made Jimmy's name and fame known to an up-and-coming generation of folk-song *aficionados* in the 1960's, and in the 1966 *Chapbook* devoted a special number to him (The Rt. Hon. Jimmy MacBeath Vol. 3 No2). At roughly the same time *Sing* (Britain's earliest folk-song magazine) produced a marvellous, illustrated bumper number devoted to the first (1965) Keele Folk Festival; the text was by Eric Winter, *Sing's* founder. In this number 'bright eyed' Jimmy appears as already very much an 'Establishment' figure on the folk scene. 'Jimmy MacBeath, King of the tramps and hawkers, and a surprise only to those who had never heard him before, endeared himself to his listeners with gesture, twinkling toes and throaty singing'

Jimmy's last public appearance in Edinburgh was at the bi-centenary ceilidh in honour of 'The Shirra and his Gang' (Sir Walter Scott and his confederates) which was held in the Portobello Town Hall on 17th. August 1971. In spite of worsening chest ailments he put on a gallant performance, and was much acclaimed by an audience which included scholars from many parts of the world.

Jimmy MacBeath died a few days after Hogmanay in 1972. Some months later the BBC made amends for years of neglect by broadcasting a splendid programme in his honour, put together and presented by Arthur Argo, and produced by James Hunter.

Tocher 12, Winter 1973.

"Ah got that sang aff Geordie Ross, the Beaully tramphe had many sangs...Oh, he wis a little wee man to look ata wee bit stootcheery kine.... and he paiddled aboot wi' a box an he wis very crabbit at times tae. If onything gaed against him he was very contermashus.....he would pretend he was a great knocker-oot, as it were, when he got this twa-three drams in him an that, when he started tae pit up his fists he aye drew them doon again. Och! it wis that dram that was speakin. He'd face up (in a fight) but he'd aye fail. When the drink's in the wit 's oot. Oh, he wis a great dancer. He had a dance whit he ca'd the Pin Reel..... he could dance on ae leg... he just diddled himsel, and he had me play the mooth organ tae himdancin the Pin Reel.....on his one leg ...an of course it took a bit o daen tae dae that."

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SA 11952/30/A2 Recorded from Jimmy MacBeath by Hamish Henderson.

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"A quick-footed, sporty little character, with the gravel voice and urbane assurance that would make him right at home on skid-row anywhere in the world... Jimmy is as sharp as tack, dapper, tweed suit, quick blue eyes, fast on his feet as a boxer. He's been everywhere and nowhere for fifty years running. And he has a song about it"

This vivid thumb-nail sketch of Jimmy MacBeath, the celebrated tramp singer from Portsoy, who died in 1972, is by Alan Lomax, the first tape collector to tape-record part of his vast repertoire. Alan had hired me as a 'native guide' when he arrived in Scotland in 1951 to make recordings for Vol. VI of the Columbia 'World Library of Folk and Primitive Music' (SL 209) and Jimmy was one of our earliest discoveries. At that time he was living in the model lodging-house in Elgin which served as his base, and we brought him by car to Turriff (where we were staying) to record him in the company of the veteran bothy ballad singer, George ('Lordy') Hay. It was an appropriate venue, for Jimmy had for many years been a kenspeckle figure at Porter Fair, the Turra feeing market. (On his last visit to the town before we escorted him back in triumph, the police had ejected him, with a warning never to set foot in Turra again; luckily they turned a blind eye when they learned he was back; see *Tocher* 12, 145.)

Among the songs we put on tape in a series of very enjoyable sessions was a splendid gallus version of the archetypal ballad of outlaw defiance, 'McPherson's Rant' which was later used on the Columbia LP.

The first record devoted entirely to Jimmy's singing was an EP '*Come a' ye Tramps and Hawkers*' (Collector JES10) published in 1960. Collector was the label of a small London company, Selection Records Ltd., which specialised in folk music. The title song had become by that time Jimmy's own personal trade-mark; first recorded during the joint tour with Lomax mentioned above, and given to the world at the Edinburgh People's Festivals in the early 1950's, it soon became one of the most popular items in the repertoires of young 'Revival' singers. It epitomises the joys, hazards and vicissitudes of Jimmy's own chosen life-style; in the opinion of Dominic Behan - a good judge in these matters - his rendering of it on this record is a 'masterpiece'

The other songs on the EP are 'Nickie Tams' (the comic bothy ballad composed by G.S. Morris of Oldmeldrum; 'The Gallant Forty-Twa' (one of the many songs about The Royal Highland Regiment, better known as the Black Watch); and 'The Moss o' Burreldales' (another well-constructed composition by G.S. Morris based on an anonymous tinker song of the same name).

Seven volumes of the ten-volume *Folksongs of Britain* series already mentioned in Part 1 of this Discography (Tocher 25) feature songs sung by Jimmy MacBeath, although some of these are unfortunately truncated. They are distributed as follows: - on Vol. 1 (12T157: Songs of Courtship), 'My Darling Ploughman Boy', which Jimmy learned from Frank Steele at the ceilidh of the Second Edinburgh People's Festival in 1952; on Vol. 2 (12T158: Songs of Seduction) 'The Wind Blew the Bonny Lassie's Plaidie awa' (in a comparative section which includes Jeanie Robertson's version of the same song) and a skittish little Lallan *port-a-beul* 'Torn a', Rippit a' my Goon'; on Vol. 3 (12T159: Jack of all Trades) 'He widna' wint his Gruel', a delicious comic song also very popular in the Revival; on Vol. 5 (12T161 : the second of two LP's devoted to the classic or 'Child' ballads), 'The

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Trooper and the Maid' (Child 299), which Jimmy had learned from 'Lordie' Hay during our sessions in the Commercial Hotel at Turriff in 1951 ; on Vol. 7 (12T195 : Fair Game and Foul) 'Van Diemen's Land', a Scottish version of a transportation ballad well known throughout the British Isles ; on Vol. 8 (12T196 : A Soldier's Life for Me) 'The Forfar Soldier', a spirited ditty of the Napoleonic Wars ; and on Vol. 10 (12T198 : Songs of Animals and Other Marvels) the 'gargantuan' bothy extravaganza 'The Muckin' o' Geordie's Byre'.

Mr. Peter A. Hall of Aberdeen - himself a well-known Revival folk-singer, and founder-member of the group 'The Gaugers' - became a close friend of Jimmy's in his latter years, and did his best to look after the old man's professional and financial interests. Peter produced for Topic Records two excellent LP's of Jimmy singing. *'Wild Rover no More'* (12T173) and *Bound to be a Row* (12T303). Both these records have some outstanding performances. My own favourites on the first are 'The Merchant's Son and the Beggar Maid' (learned from his old singing partner on the road, Jimmy Stewart); 'The Barnyards o' Delgaty', now probably the most widely disseminated of all bothy ballads; 'Drumdelgie', the song about the famous 'fairm toon up in Cairnie' which invariably took a trick at public ceilidhs, and the title song (usually known as 'The Wild Rover'). The second of these LP's brings together a whole battery of his best-loved numbers, including 'The Bonnie Lass o' Fyvie', 'Airlin's Fine Braes', 'Bogie's Bonnie Belle', 'The Magdalen Green', 'The Banks of Inverurie', and 'Bold Erin go Bragh'. One item deserves special mention. 'Pittenweem Jo' was written by the Dunfermline singer and master song-writer John Watt, whose 'Kelty Clippie' and 'Fife's Got Everything' have achieved widespread folk currency. John was thrilled on one occasion to be told by Jimmy that he would sing him a song he would sure to like, and then to hear his own 'Pittenweem Jo'. Jimmy had no idea he was singing to the author.

Heather and Glen (Tradition Records, New York, TLP 1047) contains a wealth of items collected by Alan Lomax, Calum MacLean and the present writer. On Side 1 (Songs from the North-East of Scotland) there is a marvellous recording of 'He widna' wint his Gruel', which has been described as the most delicate humorous satirical song to be collected in an area in which there is no lack of such

Last - but by no means least - songs of Jimmy's are featured on two of the albums produced by the School of Scottish Studies in collaboration with Tangent Records. On *Bothy Ballads; Music of the North-East* (TNGM 109) he gives a glorious rollicking rendition of 'The Muckin o' Geordie's Byre' (recorded at the high point of a People's Festival ceilidh, so there is plenty of delighted audience reaction), and he can also be heard singing 'Whistle ower the Lave o't', the old (mildly bawdy) words to a tune now best known as 'Katie Bairdie'. On *The Muckle Sangs*, a double album of classic ballads (TNGM 119/D) he sings a shortened version of 'The Broom of the Cowdenknowes' (Child 281), a Border ballad which is a hardy well-travelled oral migrant, and also 'The Keach in the Creel' (Child 281), the widely diffused comic ballad about a night-visiting rover which has much the same storyline as a late fourteenth-century French *fabliau*.

Tocher, 38, Spring 1983.

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When he (Davie Stewart) was twenty-two, he fell in with another strolling singer, who was likewise to achieve fame in later years on the revivalist folk scene - Jimmy MacBeath. The following graphic account of how Davie first met Jimmy was recorded by Carl MacDougall, and was published in *Chapbook*, Vol. 2, No. 6 (a special number devoted to Davie Stewart). We reprint it here, by permission of the collector and the Editor: -

" The first time I met Jimmy McBeath was in Turra (Turriff) market. He was singing

Jimmy McBeath

at the market and I was about twenty-one or twenty-two at that time, but I could hardly play the accordion, I didna ken a lot o' tunes on the accordion. I was piper but the tunes I kened I used to try on the accordion. Och it was only a ten key accordion that I got in Aberdeen for 4s 6d. I got it off a man that kept a lot o' junk in the Castlegate at Aberdeen, they call him 'Cocky' Hunter.

So I gaed awa oot tae the market that day. Of course I used to sing before I had the accordion, but man I tried tae fiddle awa wi' the thing, and I played a tunie or twa tae the ploomen, but they started laughing at me. Then they got me to start to sing the Cornkister songs, then they were a' roon me

Anyway we a' gaed intae a pub in Turra. My God, we got a good drink wi' that being the night o' the Turra show. There's a sort of show and Highland trottin' there, trottin' wi' horses. Turra is oot o' Aberdeen, and they have a Highland games and show, farm stuff and horses, football teams, dancing and piping. lots o' things.

And, of course, I made a few bob a' richt, and that was the first time I met McBeath, when he came in the pub. So I heard Jimmy singing and I says tae mysel' like; ' God, he isnae a bad singer at a'. He sang a lot o' songies, well, one or twa, like, and the baith o' us were in the pub and we had a drink thegither. Och, that's years and years ago, and ever since that I've kened Jimmy McBeath. In fact we took a turn thegither, and we did this market and the next market, but I had a different voice tae him somehow.

When we were thegither Jimmy would go away one road in the mornin" and play a different toon. And he maybe did his day's work at singing all round the different villages, and I gaed awa my own way, and we used to meet at night and muck in thegither, like. If I was at a market wi' Jimmy he would just stand beside me and collect the money for me, and I would collect it for Jimmy. But still we never sung thegither, no, I kept my money and Jimmy kept his money. When the summer was over Jimmy went back to Elgin. That was his depot. He comes from up that way, Portsoy. I went back to Aberdeen. I always went home in the wintertime. Jimmy too. Jimmy travelled, aye, all over the summertime but in the wintertime he didn't travel so much. "

Banffshire Journal, Wednesday, July 9, 1997: -

HEADSTONE SET TO MARK SINGER'S CENTENARY

Portsoy Community Council have agreed to spearhead moves to provide a headstone at the unmarked grave of one of the town's most famous sons, at the time of his centenary next year.

Jimmy McBeath was born in the town's Church Street on August 6, 1898, and became one of the most famous bothy ballad singers of his time.

The itinerant farm labourer was hailed as one of the leading entertainers in that type of music and even made several recordings and sang on radio.

He died in Aberdeen and was buried in his hometown on January 6, 1972.

His grave is unmarked and his passing has remained "unwept, unmourned and unsung" by the vast majority of fellow townspeople, due mainly to the fact that no headstone was ever erected to inform them of the great part Jimmy had played in the folklore and songs of the area.

This could now all change if a plan put forward at the monthly meeting of Portsoy and District Community Council meets with success.

Chairman Jack Mair brought the matter to the attention of the council and said that, in his opinion, something should be done to remember "this worthy son of the town."

Jimmy McBeath

And he suggested that as next year marked the centenary of Jimmy's birth, they should set in motion a move to have a headstone erected on his grave.

"This need not be any elaborate monument but simply something to say who Jimmy was and the part he played in North-east folk music over many years when he became something of a celebrity, broadcasting and recording his type of songs which were so familiar to people of that generation, and especially the farming community," said Mr. Mair.

Note: -

A memorial was eventually erected in Portsoy Cemetery on Friday 27th. August 1999 at a public ceremony. The Rev. Melvin Wood, a native of Portsoy officiated.



(Book 5/James McBeath)

Revised : - 3 April, 2013