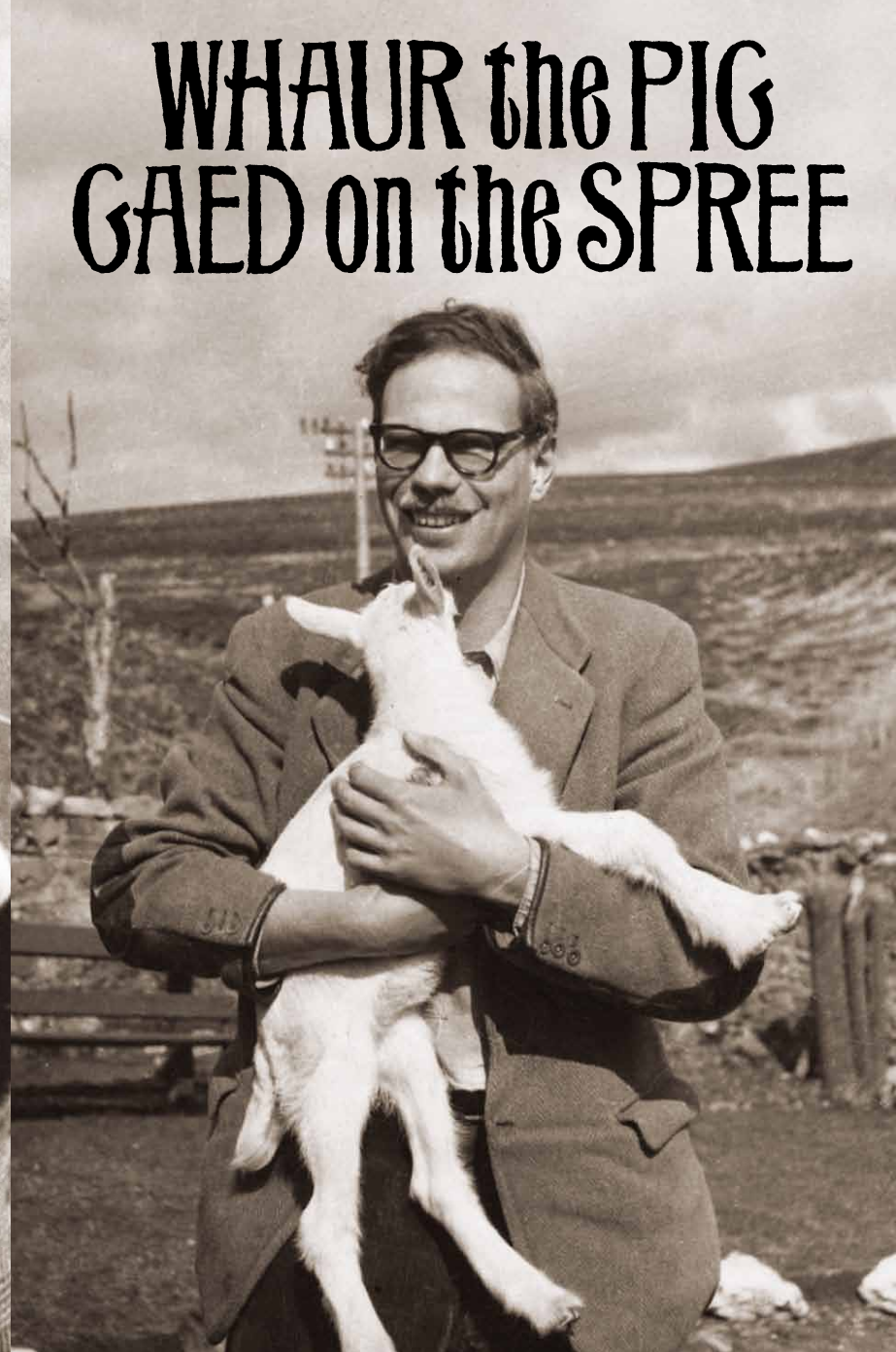
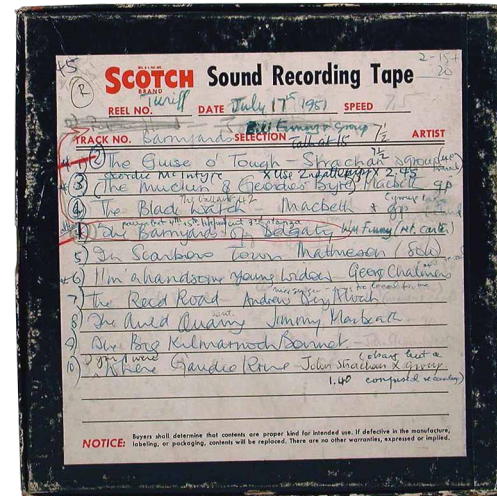


WHAUR the PIG GAED on the SPREE



Introduction

Alasdair Roberts



In early December 2010 I was delighted to receive an email from Nathan Salsburg asking whether I would be interested in compiling a release of Alan Lomax's 1950's Scottish field recordings. As a part-Scottish musician with a strong interest in the traditional music and culture of the nation in which I live, I relished the prospect of listening through these many hours of important archival material and selecting some of my favourite tracks for the final release.

My recent work has been very much concerned with Scottish tradition—the CD/LP *Too Long In This Condition* (Drag City, 2010), credited to Alasdair Roberts & Friends, featured interpretations of folk songs and ballads. However, there is another, continually developing aspect which involves drawing on traditional melodic and textual material and the folkloric stock of Scotland and the wider world, among other sources, to create new song work. This is the manner in which I see my practice developing—respectfully and imaginatively interrogating the cultural heritage of Scotland and beyond in order to create new, forward-thinking and idiosyncratic music

I perceive the kind of material collected by Lomax on his Caledonian travels in the 1950's (and field recordings by others, such as those which are housed in the sound archive of the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh) as the bedrock of this potential new music. The old singers have bequeathed a wellspring from which I am certain I will draw for the rest of my life. I am honoured to be able to present a selection of their music here in the belief that others, whether in Scotland or further afield, will find it similarly creatively stimulating.

Regardless of any kind of artistic use to which these historical recordings might nowadays be put, it is simply a pleasure to listen to the material for its own sake: the many wonderful singers and musicians—too many to mention—and beautiful songs, ballads and tunes of Scotland, recorded for posterity. I have tried to provide a comprehensive overview of the various musical traditions within the nation, and the various characters (some famous, some less well-known and some anonymous) who were active in that period. However, due to the limitations of time and the fact that my own interests tend towards traditional balladry and narrative song, there is a preponderance of such material on this compilation. The passion, rawness, command, depth of understanding of their material and uniqueness of style of the tradition-bearers contained herein—of Jeannie Robertson, Jimmy MacBeath, Davie Stewart and others—should serve as a model for all contemporary revivalist performers.

Although I am not a Gaelic speaker, I have a growing interest in (and an outsider's love for) Gaelic music and culture. Gaelic song constitutes a large part of Lomax's original recordings and my initial selection for this compilation featured some examples of this. After giving the matter some thought, however, I decided to create a compilation featuring only Scots/English language material, in the belief that the future task of compiling a selection from Lomax's Scottish Gaelic recordings would be best left to somebody with a deeper understanding of Gaelic culture.

—Glasgow, Scotland, July 2011

Whaur the Pig Gaed on the Spree: Scottish Recordings by Alan Lomax, 1951-'57

Nathan Salsburg



In the Spring of 1951 Alan Lomax was living in London, working as a radio producer and field recordist for the BBC, and under contract with Columbia Records to curate a series of LPs called the “World Library of Folk and Primitive Music.” He had toured Ireland in January of the year with the dual purpose of expanding the BBC’s and Radio Eireann’s archival holdings of regional folk recordings and compiling the *Ireland* volume of the “World Library,” which would be the first long-playing album of the island’s traditional music ever released.

Next up for Lomax was *World Library: England*, for which he planned to draw a few songs representing the music of Scotland from discs recorded “in the field” in the mid-1940s by BBC engineers, and stored in the corporation’s Recorded Programmes Library. But a meeting with poet, translator, Scots Nationalist, Communist and folk-song collector Hamish Henderson, arranged by their mutual friend Ewan MacColl, blew open Lomax’s conception of Scotland’s folk tradition. Shortly thereafter, Alan wrote that the “conversation was extremely important... Hamish feels that Scotland is the most interesting and important place on earth, with a real live people’s culture, now on the march, and I must say, he made me share his feeling.”

Lomax spent several weeks that summer dragging his Magnecord tape recorder throughout Scotland, joined by Henderson in the Lowlands and

brothers Calum and Sorley MacLean (the latter a poet as well) in the Gaelic-speaking Highlands and islands. They recorded Gaelic work songs of land and sea, urban children’s games, pipe tunes, the bothy ballads of North-east farm laborers, Burns compositions and many Child ballad variants, in whole and in part. Alan wasn’t just impressed by the diversity of the country’s traditional music; he was astounded by the depth of Scots’ knowledge and appreciation of it. As he wrote in the introduction to the *World Library: Scotland* LP:

It was the vigor in Scots folk singing on the one hand, and its close connection with literary sources on the other, that impressed me.... The Scots have the liveliest folk tradition of the British Isles, and paradoxically, it is also the most bookish.... Everywhere in Scotland I collected songs of written or literary origin from country singers; at the same time, I constantly encountered learned Scotsmen who knew traditional verses of the great folk songs.

Back in the States, Alan Lomax had promoted folk culture with missionary zeal, considering it the most true and noble expression of the American experience; he had also hitched it to the wagon of progressivism in the form

of the People's Songs group and its singing campaign on behalf of Henry Wallace's long-shot presidential run in 1948. Scotland was then, for him, the embodiment of an ideal—a geographically, linguistically, and occupationally diverse people bound together in a national identity inalienable from, and in fact deeply informed by, its national folklore. As Hamish Henderson and others have noted, the preservation of native folk traditions was a crucial means



of preserving that identity, bruised as it had been by so many years of English domination. This was an enormous inspiration to Lomax, as was working with collaborators who shared his left-wing sensibility—a sensibility, ironically, that had put him on the watch-list of Senator McCarthy and hastened his departure from his homeland a year earlier.

The inspiration was mutual. What had been for most Scottish song-collectors a predominantly textual practice of documentation in the long tradition of Sir Walter Scott to Gavin Greig rapidly became a recording-based one that began swelling the archives of the University of Edinburgh's newly established School of Scottish Studies. "A sense of revelation may sound a corny phrase," Hamish Henderson explained, "but it is accurate enough if you wish to describe the feelings of hundreds of young folk introduced to our tape-recordings 'in the spring of the year.'"

Henderson had been invited to direct a ceilidh at the Edinburgh People's Festival that was planned for the end of August 1951 by trade unions, arts organizations, and the Scottish Communist Party—it was to counterbalance the *beaux-arts* emphasis of the mainstream Edinburgh International Festival. The People's Festival organizers envisioned the ceilidh as a celebration of Scotland's traditional music and song—particularly as maintained by the laboring classes—and invited a number of the singers and players Lomax had recorded earlier that summer to appear: Buckie fishwife Jessie Murray, Fyvie land-owner John Strachan, Traveller singer and the last "King of the Cornkisters" Jimmy MacBeath, 19-year-old pipe prodigy John Burgess (later crowned "King of the Highland Pipers"). The artists were, as Henderson (who also served as MC) wrote in the program, "all without exception... men and women who have learned these splendid songs by word of mouth in their own childhood, and who give them in the traditional manner. This fact alone will make the People's Festival Ceilidh an absolutely unique thing in the cultural history of Edinburgh."

(Hamish, partially on the strength of his collaboration with Lomax and direction of the Ceilidh, was soon hired at the School of Scottish Studies. They found him so valuable, as he later wrote, that they "disregarded my suspect politics at long last and offered me a job.")

Alan came up from London to record the Ceilidh, which was ecstatically received by the urban audience, most of whom had never heard such unadulterated traditional song—much less seen it performed live. The applause was so loud that he was forced to ride the Magnecord's faders all evening, and it was

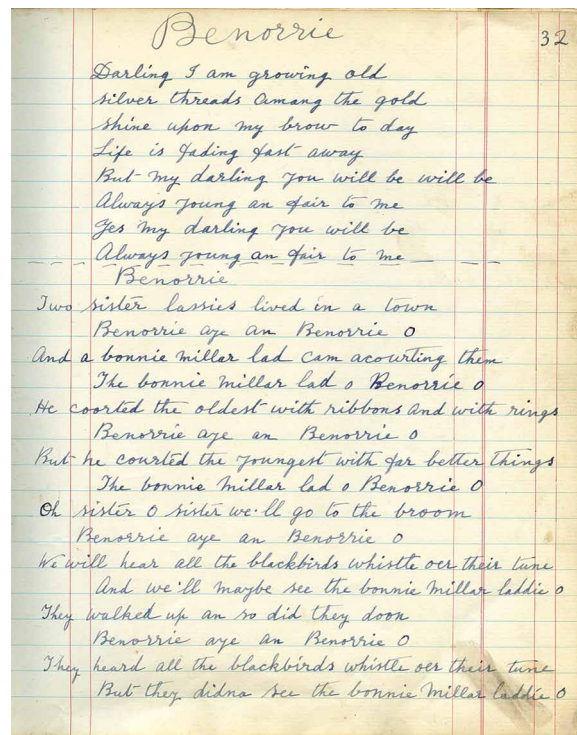
so sustained that he often had to stop the machine to conserve tape. "Later that night—or was it that morning?" Henderson recalled in 1965,

Jimmy MacBeath stopped in York Place, shook himself loose from the friends who were supporting him home, and lifting his mottled face to the moon, sang 'The Bleacher Lassie O Kelvinhaugh.' All over Auld Reekie the ceilidh was continuing. In a sense, it is continuing still.

It's those echoes this release celebrates, commemorating 60 years of Scotland's folk revival, with one of its most gifted heirs at the wheel. In addition to his talents as a songwriter, Alasdair Roberts is a peerless arranger and interpreter of traditional material; he has the extremely uncommon ability of making a ballad—sometimes of a vintage of some several hundred years—convincingly his own, without occluding or obscuring the elements of palimpsest that he wields to the tradition. His graceful synthesis of individual artistry with this collective tradition makes him an ideal representative of the continuity of the revival, and the Alan Lomax Archive and Twos & Fews are pleased to present with him this curation of Lomax's Scottish recordings in their 60th year.

Lomax's tape box from the
Commercial Hotel recording
session in Turriff.

—Louisville, Kentucky, May 2011.



Many thanks to Dr John Purser for providing a copy of his own notated information sheets relating to Alan Lomax's recordings; Ewan McVicar, who has researched thoroughly and written extensively on Alan Lomax's 1950s Scottish recordings; Donald Lindsay with help in identifying bagpipe tunes; and Cathlin MacCaulay at the School of Scottish Studies.

All recordings made by Alan Lomax, 1951–1957, with the collaboration of Hamish Henderson in 1951 and 1953.

Mastered by Marcos Sueiro Bal.
Layout by Dan Osborn.

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At left:
"Binorrie" entry in one of Willie Mathieson's songbooks.
Courtesy of the School of Scottish Studies.

Front cover:
Hamish Henderson,
place and date unknown.
Courtesy of the Alan Lomax Archive.

Back cover:
Jimmy MacBeath, probably at Lomax's flat in London, 1953. Photo by Alan Lomax.
Courtesy of the Alan Lomax Archive.