

PARTIAL TRANSCRIPTION

Duncan Williamson sings his own song “The Dearest Friend I Ever Had,” with comments ScottishVoicesProj.0523

[This recording was made in August 1986 at a rented house in Auchtermuchty, Fife. Present were Williamson, John Niles, and seven or eight members of Niles’s research team. The transcription begins two minutes and ten seconds into the excerpt, after Williamson has talked about Travellers having been good soldiers because they were used to camping out in the woods, so that they were keen observers of everything happening around them.]

DW: So in 1914 there was a great — an old chap called Johnny Whyte, and he was a batman to a colonel in India. And because [the colonel] came from the Fotheringhams in Forfar, they were kind of distantly related to the royalty, you know, the royal family. And the only man that the Fotheringham would have for a batman during the war in India was — the first World War I’m talking about — was this travelling man, Johnny Whyte. And he was a great batman.

JN: A batman?

DW: Aye, you know, a butler, like we call him, you know? A flunky, a butler, you know, he's a batman. Cleans his buttons, polishes his boots, and takes care o him, you know? For, eh, an officer, like, he was an officer, he was a colonel. And he needed someone to tuik care of him. You know, all colonels had a batman. And, eh, that's what they call him, yeah. And he tuik care of him.

And, eh, he was a Traveller. And it caused — there were a lot of them that was a little envious. And the colonel had heard about this, and he called them all before him, ye know? And he said, “Luik,” he said, “I know there's a little envisy [envy] going around these barracks,” and he said, “an people are hearin a lot o stories because this John Whyte who is one of the travelling folk is my batman,” he says. He says, “I prefer this man,” he said, “because this man has taught me more than any teachin college I've been in.” An, he said, “I want tae hear no more about it.”

That was true. And there were never anymore of anything said. When the commanding officer had said, “This was my man, that the travelling man is the man I want,” then there was no more envy. They told Johnny, he said, “Luik, after the war if you don't come to me after you come home from the wars,” he said, “I'll come searching for you. Even if supposing I have to give everything up that I own, I'll find you again.”

And Ah asked old Johnny, I said, “Did you ever go back an see him?”

“No,” he said, “in fact, I never did.” He said, “I got married, and I had a family, and I travelled all around, I travelled all around the country, but,” he says, “I never got back in touch with Fotheringham again. I never got back in touch with Futheringham again. I never went. I never even saw him,” he said.

So I thought to myself, this was a very good theme for me to write myself one of my songs, you know. So, eh, I said, "I wonder what the commanding officer was really thinking when he said that," ye know. So, eh, I wrote this song about the both o them, ye know? [*Sings:*]

- 1 Oh I've been east and I've been west
I've travelled far and free
But the dearest friend I ever had
was a tinker man to me.
- 2 He taught me things I did not know
about my own country
An the nicest friend I ever had
was a tinker man to me
- 3 Oh I have money and I have land
and I have mansions three
and I would give them all tonight
If a tinker I could be.
- 4 I'll give away my money, I'll sell my land
I'll sell my mansions three
And I will go on the road tonight
And a tinker I will be.
- 5 I'll travel east, I'll travel west
I'll wander far and free
and I will go on searching
till my tinker I do see.

DW: But he never found him. He never found him, ye know.

All: [*Some applause and approving words.*]

DW: So I wrote that wonderful song just because it inspired me that it was a wonderful thing. And I sing it round the farm [?]. Of course it doesn't really mean much unless you know the story.