

## TRANSCRIPTION

### Duncan Williamson sings his own song, “The Caber”

ScottishVoicesProj.0505

[This recording was made in August 1986 at the Williamson’s home at Kincairgie Farm Cottage, near Strathmiglo, Fife. Present were Duncan Williamson, John Niles, and three members of Niles’s research team. Also present in the session were Linda Williamson, who is preparing some things in the kitchen while this recording is in progress, and the Williamsons’ two children Betsy and Thomas.]

DW: As a young chap around the bothies, you were expected to do all the dirty work, ye see? So, they were up to all the tricks, ye know? The older men played all their dirty tricks on you. So young Jack went to the bothy for his first time, for his first week. And he was big and strong; a big and handsome man like Alan here — [*corrects himself:*] like David here.<sup>1</sup> And they said, “What are ye daein, laddie?” he said. “Tomorrow’s the Games!” (You know, the traditional Games, tossin the caber an throwin the hammer, ye know?) He said, “What are you doin here? Why didnae you go down Saturday and try — an go to the Games? An if you become a hammer thrower or a caber tosser —”

Simple Jack, he said, “Dae ye mean tae tell me you can mak money in this?”

And the gaffer, ye know, the foreman, he sees that “This was a real trick we’re goin to play on Jack”; he says, “Of course, laddie, ye can throw the hammer,” he says, “toss the caber. Wonderful things you can dae at the Games,” ye know?

Jack says, “You think I could do something? What would you think Ah would be best at?”

“Well,” he says, “Ah think the best thing you could dae, Jack, is run and toss the caber. A big loon like you; a big powerful lad.”

Noo Jack had never seen a caber in his life. See? He didnae know what a caber was! So he gets on his nicky tams, ye know — like these belts wi ties to his legs — away he goes doon in his natural warkin dress tae the Games field. And this is what happened. [*Sings, tapping his foot to mark time; Duncan’s children join in softly on the chorus:*]

1 He said, “Noo Ah’m tired o my fairm wark,  
Noo I’m tired o my labor,  
I’m gang awa doon tae the Games,  
I’m-a try and toss the caber.

*Chorus:* Wi my doo dum dae, my diddie dum da,  
My diddie dum doo dum duddie-O.

2 I gangs doon tae the Games park,  
The first thing I did see

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<sup>1</sup> “Like David here: this is David Kotyk, one of the volunteers on Niles’s research team. David was operating the video camera.

Was twenty kilted Highland lads  
A-gathered round a tree.

*Chorus*

3 They were fairmers in their Sunday best,  
Babies in their prams,  
But me jist like a muckle fool  
There in my nickie tams.

*Chorus*

4 Then a lassie she cries oot,  
“Oh Jeck,” she cries to me,  
“Come show these kilted Highland lads  
The way tae toss the tree!”

*Chorus*

5 Noo Ah been fed on tattie kail  
An Ah been fed on brose,<sup>2</sup>  
But hoo Ah’m gonnae toss that tree  
Oh God he only knows!

*Chorus*

6 So Ah took twa steps forward,  
My banes begin tae crack,  
Oh and the next thing that I kent  
I was lyin on ma back.

*Chorus*

7 Noo Ah hae courted a maiden  
Aroond the barn door,  
But tae lie an cuddle a big pine tree  
I never done before!

*Chorus*

8 Tae mak your fortune at the Games  
Is a thing you cannae do.  
So I warn all youse plooman lads

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<sup>2</sup> “Tattie kail”: a mixed dish of potatoes and kail. “Brose”: oatmeal, mixed with boiling water and allowed to stand for a while, then customarily eaten with salt and a serving of milk.

Just bide around your ploo!

Wi my doo dum dae, my diddae dum da,  
My diddae dum doo dum duddie-O.

[*Demonstrates the action of the song by acting out the part where Jack falls on his back while cuddling the big pine tree, with a running commentary that is not transcribed here.*]

DW: Now that is a bothy song. A bothy *ballad* is another thing.

### **Note 1**

One of the “heavy” contests taking place traditionally at Highland Games in Scotland is tossing the caber, a tall pole that can be likened to a tapered telephone pole with its thick end at the top. An athlete who enters this contest must be strong enough to hold the caber upright, with his arms lowered and his fingers interlocked so as to cradle it close to his body, before taking a few steps forward so as to gain momentum, then launching the caber so that it flips forward end over end. The winner of the contest is the one whose caber falls to the ground in the position nearest to “12 o’clock.” Less successful contestants may fail to flip the caber at all.

### **Note 2**

This song of Williamson’s composition does not seem to have been published before. Another title by which he referred to it is “Nickie Tams.” Other recordings by John Niles of Duncan singing it are on Niles’s tapes 86DW07, 86DW10, 86DW30 (along with videotape 86V01), 86DW35, and 87DW07. As this was one of Williamson’s favorite “ceilidh songs,” he sang it with gusto, in language imitative of Aberdeenshire dialect, encouraging others to join in on the chorus.

In a recording dating from 1967 posted at the website *Tobar an Dualchais / Kist o Riches*, Williamson presents the song as a poem in progress at that time, one for which he had apparently not yet found a tune. The tune that he ended up adopting is traditionally associated with the Scottish song “The Overgate,” as sung for example by Belle Stewart and transcribed in Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger’s compilation *Till Doomsday in the Afternoon: The Folklore of a Family of Scots Travellers, the Stewarts of Blairgowrie* (Manchester University Press, 1986), no. 59, pp. 260–62.

### **Appendix**

What follows is a transcription of Williamson singing this song on a different occasion, a meeting of the Glenfarg Folk Club at Glenfarg, Perthshire, on July 16, 1984 (Niles tape 84GF02).

DW: I wrote this song a long time ago because I saw this newspaper reporter who had went to Braemar Games,\* and just for a trick or fun, he thought that he would try and toss the caber.

So in the bothy days, in the olden times, the loon, or the boy who was the youngest in the bothy — all the rest, the foreman and the grieve, always tried and played tricks on the loon. So Jack, being the youngest loon in the bothy, they all built up a story and said, “Tomorrow’s the Games, Jack. Why din you go down to the Games and try and toss the caber at the Games?” So Jack said, “Well, maybe I could try my best, because I think I’m as good as any o these.” So Jack made up his mind next morning to go down to the Games. Could be Braemar Games or any Games, Tarland or Banchory Games, any Games, to go and toss the caber. So this is what happened when Jack went to toss the caber. [*Sings:*]

1 Oh noo Ah’m tired o my fairm wark,  
Noo I’m tired o my labor,  
I’m gang awa doon tae the Games,  
I’m-a try and toss the caber.

*Chorus:* Wi my doo dum dae, my dinnae dum da,  
My dinnae dum dae dum da di O.

2 I gang doon tae the Games park,  
And the first thing I did see  
Was twenty kilted Highland lads  
A-gaithered roond a tree.

*Chorus*

3 They were fairmers in their Sunday best,  
Babies<sup>3</sup> in their prams,  
But me jist like a muckle fool  
There in my nickie tams.<sup>4</sup>

*Chorus*

4 Then a lassie she cries oot,  
“Jeck,” she cries to me,  
“Come show these kilted Highland lads  
The way tae toss the tree!”

*Chorus*

5 Noo Ah been fed on tattie kail

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<sup>3</sup> “Babies”: pronounced like “bobbies.”

<sup>4</sup> “Nickie tams”: a pair of straps or strings tied to a farmworker’s stockings below the knee to keep the stockings in place.

An Ah been fed on brose,  
But hoo Ah'm gonnae toss that tree  
Oh God he only knows!

*Chorus*

6 I took twa steps forward,  
My banes began tae crack,  
Oh and the next thing that I kent  
I was lyin on ma back.

*Chorus*

7 Noo Ah hae courted a maiden  
Aroond the barn door,  
But tae lie an cuddle a big pine tree  
I never done before!

*Chorus*

8 For tae mak your fortune at the Games  
At's the thing you cannae do.  
So I warn all youse plooman lads  
Just bide around your ploo!

Wi my doo dum dae, my dinnae dum da,  
My dinnae dum dae dum da di O.