

TRANSCRIPTION

Duncan Williamson sings two poems he set to music, “John Barleycorn” and “Lord Ullin’s Daughter”

ScottishVoicesProj.0436

[This recording was made in August 1986 in the sitting room of a rented house in Auchtermuchty, Fife. Present were Duncan Williamson, John Niles, and four members of Niles’s research team. Some of the group sing along softly on the chorus.]

DW: [*Sings:*]

1 There were three kings into the East,
 Three kings both great and high,
 And they had sworn a solemn oath:
 John Barleycorn must die.

2 So they took a plow, they plowed him down,
 Put clods upon his head,
 An then they swore a solemn oath:
 “John Barleycorn is dead.”

chorus: Oh-ho, ho, poor Barley,
 Oh poor Barleycorn!
 It would cut the heart from a dying man
 To hear John Barley groan.

3 And then the spring it entered mild,
 And showers began to fall,
 John Barleycorn got up again,
 And he so surprised them all.

4 And then the summer entered warm,
 And he grew strong and tall,
 His head well armed with pointed spears —
 No one could do him wrong.

5 And then October entered mild,
 And he grew wan and pale,
 His bending head — [*Coughs*] — and droopin joints
 Showed he’d began to fail.

 Oh-ho, ho, poor Barley,
 Oh, poor Barleycorn!
 It would cut the heart from a dying man

To hear poor Barley groan.

- 6 His color sickened more and more
 As he grew into age,
 And then his enemies began
 To show their deadly rage.
- 7 They took a weepion long and sharp
 And they cut him by the knee;
 They tied him fast upon a cart,
 Like a rogue for forgery.
- 8 They laid him out upon the floor
 To work him farther oer,
 And as the signs o life appeared,
 They tossed him to and fro.
- 9 They filled up a deep an darksome pit
 With water to the brim;
 They heaved in poor John Barleycorn
 To let him sink or swim.
- 10 They roastit oer a scorching fire
 The marrow off his bones,
 But the miller used him worst of all —
 He crushed him between two stones.
- 11 And then they tuik his very heart's blood
 And they drank it round and round,
 And as the more and more they drank,
 Their joy did more abound.
- 12 Now John Barleycorn is a noble man
 Of gentle enterprise,
 And if you do but taste his blood
 It will make your courage rise.
- 13 It will make a man forget his woes,
 {Will tiding} all his joy;
 It will make the widow's heart to sing,
 Though tears be in her eye.
- 14 So here's to dear John Barleycorn,
 Each man a glass in hand,
 And may his great prosperity
 Never fail in all Scotland.

chorus: Oh-ho, ho, John Barley,
 Oh John Barleycorn!
 It would cut the heart from a dying man
 To hear John Barley groan.

All: [*Words of appreciation.*]

DW: That was nice, wasn't it! That's the true story of John Barleycorn. See, we make all our whisky from the barley. And that's the true story of John Barleycorn. Hit was wrote by Robert Burns. Robert Burns wrote it as a poem, an Ah put it to music an sang it. And when I started singin it, Collins, the publisher, was so interested in me, that I had made it— It was never sung; Ah'm the only person that sings it.

JN: How did you find the tune for it, Duncan?

DW: Well, this tune was another old tune that my father used to play on the bagpipes, a long time ago. An when Ah started composin, you see — What Ah believe, Jack, what you need to understand — these poets of long ago like Keats, Tennyson, Brownin, Wordsworth, and all these people — they wrote wonderful poems. Now when I started lookin at these poems as a child, and hearin my father tellin these wonderful ballads, “These great poets,” Ah said, “had only wrote something from a poem that they’d heard as a song.” And Ah said that these songs — these poems by Keats, Tennyson, Longfellow, an all these wonderful poets was not — these was not wroten as poems. These just wrote a poem for a song that was *already there*. So the magic was that I wanted to bring all these poems, like — Have you ever heard [*names a poem; hard to discern what*]. Have you ever heard “The Brook”? Have you ever heard “Lord Ullin’s Daughter”? Have you ever heard “The Battle of Hohenlinden”? These are poems, and Ah’ve put all these poems to music, because Ah believe that they were music a long time ago; that these poets had tuik songs an {published} them in a poem-book only for the songs that were around a long time ago. An people didnae believe it when they {played}—

Listen to this one. This tells a story about, called — it's called “Lord Ullin's Daughter.” Now nobody in the world ever sings “Lord Ullin's Daughter” but myself. [*Clears throat.*] So I said, these poems are so wonderful — why doesn't people put em to music? Like I done with the John Barleycorn. [*Sings:*]

- 1 A chieftain to the Highlands bound
 Cried, “Boatman, do not tarry,
 And I'll give you a silver pound,
 To row me o'er the ferry.”
- 2 “It's fast before our father's men
 Three days we fled together,
 And should they find me in the glen,

My blood would stain the heather.”

- 3 “Oh who be you would cross Loch Goil,
This dark and stormy water?”
“Oh, I'm the chief of all this isle,
And this is Lord Ullin's daughter.”
- 4 “Oh fast behind are Father's men,
Three days we fled together,
And should they find me in the glen,
My blood would stain the heather.”
- 5 “Oh hurry please,” the lady cried,
“Though tempests round us gather;
I'll meet the raging of the seas,
But not an angry father.”
- 6 Then up and spoke the hardy Highland wight,
“I'll go, my chief, I'm ready;
It is not for your silver pound,
But for your winsome lady.”
- 7 The boat has left the stormy land,
A stormy sea before her,
When all too strong for human hand
The tempest gathered o'er her.
- 8 Lord Ullin reached the fatal shore,
His wrath was turned to wailin,
“Come back, come back,” Lord Ullin cried,
“Across the stormy water,
And I'll forgive your Highland chief,
My daughter, O my daughter.”
- 9 And then the {loud wish} lashed ashore,
Return {prevayed} preventing;
The waters wild went o'er his child,
And he was left lamenting.

DW: That is a poem by Tennyson.¹

MJ: Oh!

¹ “A poem by Tennyson”: the actual author was the somewhat earlier poet Thomas Campbell (1777–1844).

DW: I was the only person in the world that ever put it to music and sang it. And sang many many more! Ah get a pleasure of takin these poems wrote by Tennyson, Keats, and Poe and puttin them to music and singin em; which is — I believe that they were songs long time ago, and these poets, late poets, back in the 1700's, had wrote them from songs. Listen to this! It's called "The Wreck of the Hesperus."

[This excerpt breaks off here; Williamson's performance of "The Wreck of the Hesperus" is available as a separate excerpt.]

DW = Duncan Williamson

MJ = Maria Jeffress