

## TRANSCRIPTION

### **Duncan Williamson sings the ballad “Sir Patrick Spens,” with comments**

ScottishVoicesProj.0504

[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 from time to time were Linda Williamson and the Williamsons’ two children Betsy and Thomas.

The first part of the transcription is set between square brackets since this part of the recording session is not part of the audio excerpt.]

[DW: So now, Jack, are you interested in any traditional ballads? You were telling me this one traditional ballad you loved very much, your favorite one. You love the story about Sir Patrick Spens, you were telling me about. Was it that the one you loved, or was it some other one? What were you telling me last time in the car going over?

JN: Yeah. That's one, Duncan, that we're interested in, and interested in the story about Sir Patrick, as well, which not many people know.

DW: That's true.

JN: So why don't you share that with us?]

DW: Well, the story is that in Scotland, we had the king of Scotland. Alexander, the King of Scotland, lived in Dunfermline. Now, we had three Alexanders. We had Alexander the first, Alexander the second, and Alexander the third. Alexander the first was married to the daughter of old King Canute, the man who tried to turn back the tide. Ye know? Alexander the second was a brother-in-law to Edward the Conqueror of the Scots— brother-in-law. He was married to sister Margaret.

But Alexander the third had never married. He was an old man, up in his sixties, I would think, the third Alexander of Scotland. Then he was promised a young wife, a young woman for his wife, from the king of Norway. So they would unite the two countries: Norway and Scotland united. So then Alexander accepted this because he was a lonely old man.

And then he said, “Well, there's nothing good enough for my young queen, tae send an old boat in the middle of winter to Norway.” And he wanted the young woman to keep him company through the cold winter night, right? So he gave orders to Burntisland.<sup>1</sup> There's always been a ship-building yard in Burntisland, back to the days of the sailing ships and long before that. In medieval times they built boats — even dugout canoes in Burntisland at one time. So he gave orders to build the boat for to take a crew to Norway to bring back the young woman tae be

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<sup>1</sup> Burntisland, on the south coast of Fife, not far from the king’s residence at Dumfermline.

his queen. So now, after he had built the boat, the boat was ready. But by the time it was finished, it was the middle of winter.

And the King needed to have a good skipper to take this boat to Norway because in these days navigation was very poor. He needed to have a seaman. Now, the greatest seaman in Scotland at that time was a chap known as Sir Patrick Spens. But Sir Patrick Spens was an old man and he had retired, and he had given up the sea. And then one night, all around the king's table, having a drink and a talk, the king explained the situation to all his noblemen. And one old man sittin beside the King said, "I know the perfect man for you, my lord." And this is what happened. [*Sings:*]

1        Oh, the King he sits in Dunfermline town  
          He's a-drinkin the blood red wine  
          He said, "Whaur shall I find a skeiley skipper  
          Who'll sail this new ship of mine?"

2        Then up an speaks an auld elderly knight  
          Who sits by the King's right knee  
          He said, "Sir Patrick Spens is the finest sailor  
          That ever that sailed the sea."

3        So the King he's taken his quill in hand  
          And in a letter he did say,  
          "You maun tak this to Sir Patrick Spens  
          You maun tak it right away."

4        Oh the first words Sir Patrick read  
          Oh, a tear it blinded his ee  
          And the next words Sir Patrick read  
          Oh, a loud laugh laughed he.

5        He said, "Wha's gone and done this thing  
          And tellt the King on me,  
          That I maun sail through storm and gale  
          That I maun gang to Norway?"

6        But I'll sail, my Lord, I will go, my King,  
          I'll sail right through the faem;  
          I'll make my way to Norway  
          And I'll bring your Margaret hame."

7        So they sailed away from Dunfermline toon  
          They sailed right through the faem  
          For they were bound for Norway  
          Just to bring young Margaret hame.

- 8 Well, they hadnae been in Norway  
A week nor scarcely three  
When the highest lords in the King's court  
They turned around and did say,
- 9 “Oh those Scottish men, they drink oor wines  
And they spend oor gold,  
And they have come from Scotland  
And they brought none of their own.”
- 10 Oh you leiers aloud,” cried Sir Patrick Spens, [leiers: liars]  
“You leiers aloud,” cried he,  
“There's twenty thousand of gold and silver  
In a dowry I have brought with me.
- 11 But I'll sail this night, this very night,  
I'll sail right through the faem,  
I will make my way to Scotland  
And I'll bring young Margaret hame.”
- 12 So they sailed away from Norway,  
They sailed right through the faem,  
For they were bound for Dunfermline toon  
Just to bring young Margaret hame.
- 13 But in the Firth o Forth they ran into a storm  
And the waves around them they did sweep  
Now Sir Patrick Spens and his gallant crew  
Lie sleepin in the deep.

DW: Now, they sailed all the way from Norway to the Firth of Forth just outside of Burntisland, across from Edinburgh. All the way they sailed. And they met a storm and they only were at Aberdour, was about six miles from Dunfermline, when they were sunk by a storm. Sir Patrick Spens, the princess, the crew, and all lies asleep in the Firth of Forth till this day. The king was so upset that he got on his horse and he rode up close to the cliffs of Dunfermline, and he went over the cliff and was killed.

That was Alexander the third, was killed off his horse on the cliff. He was so upset watchin for the boat coming in that he fell over the cliffs and was killed. And that is a true story.

[There follows some talk, not transcribed here, about how Williamson learned the story and the song: first of all from Traveller traditions, and then also by consulting Nigel Tranter's discussion of this episode of Scottish history. Tranter was the author of *The Story of Scotland* (1987) and many other books of an historical character.]