

TRANSCRIPTION

Duncan Williamson sings the Border ballad “The Brothers”

ScottishVoicesProj.0502

[This recording was made in August, 1986, at a rented house in Auchtermuchty, Fife. Present were Duncan Williamson, John Niles, and four members of his research team.]

DW: So it tells a story about three brothers. An one of the brothers was a member of the Border rievvers. An he was threwn in jail in Dumfries, ye know. And the oldest brother was very big and very strong. And the youngest brother – ah, let’s have the story. So: they wanted to go to Dumfries because their brother was to be hung in the morning. Now some people calls it by many other names. Ye know? They call it “Archie o Cawfield”; they call it by many names. But we have it as “The Brothers,” among the travelling community. An it tells a wonderful story. Now the music is not very wonderful, but the story is good. [*Sings:*]

- 1 I luiked out o my father’s window
Betwixt the garden and the wall,
And there I haird two brothers talking,
Oh, but they talked so softely.
- 2 He said, “Our brother Tom, now, he lies in jail,
Then mourns the day that he’s goin tae dee,
But if I had twa men like mysel
Afore the cock crowed, oh, he’d be free.”
- 3 Then up an spake the youngest brother,
Oh, but he spoke sae boastfully,
Sayin, “Tak me wi ye, oh Brother John,
We’ll gang an get our brother free.”
- 4 “Oh, haud your tongue, noo,” says Brother John,
“It’s only a laddie that you be.
Ah need three strong men like mysel
Oh, fir to get your brother free.”
- 5 Then up an spoke the youngest brother,
Oh, he, oh, spoke boastfully,
“We stay noo here, [*coughs*] Brother John,
And we let our brother dee.”

[*Coughs again; clears throat; remarks “Excuse me.”*]

- 6 Then up an spoke, oh, brother John,

Oh but he spoke softly,
Gang get your horse, then, brother dear
And we will get our brother free.”

7 So it’s on their horses and awa they rode,
Oh, but they rode swiftly,
And when they came to the smiddy door
They turned their horses’ shoes back forwardly.

8 Then on their horses and awa they rode,
Oh but they rode so swiftly,
But when they came to the Annan Water¹
It was flowin like ony sea.

9 Then up and spoke the youngest brother,
Oh, but he spoke sae fightly,
“My horse is young and I cannae swim
Oh, Brother John, what will I dae?”

10 “Jump up behind me,” says Brother John,
“But dinnae let his bridle free.”
So on their horses and awa they swam,
Oh, but they swam so swiftly.
But when they came to Dumfries jail
Hit was barely at the break of day.

11 Oh the first door that John come tae
I’m sure they made it gang in three.
The next door that John come tae
He opened it noo without a key.

12 He said, “Stand up, stand up, oh Brother Tom,
For that you I’ve come to see,
Stand up, stand up, oh Brothers Tom,
For I have come fir to set you free.”

13 “Oh, hold your tongue, noo,” says Brother Tom,
“Oh dae you see what I can see?
There’s fifty pound of Swedish iron
Betwixt my ankle and my knee.

[*Spoken aside: “The ball an chain, ye know?”*]

There’s fifty pound of Swedish iron

¹ The Annan Water: a river in southwest Scotland, east of Dumfries.

Betwixt my ankle and my knee.”

14 So he picked him up into his airms,
An he carried him like a butterflee,
Wi twenty pound [*corrects himself*] — fifty pound o Swedish iron
Betwixt his ankle and his knee.
So on their horses and awa they swam,
Oh, but they swam so swiftly.

15 Then up and spoke the youngest brother;
He says, “Brother — — —

[*Here there is a 15-second gap in the recording as the tape changes direction.*]

— — — — —
— — — his ankle and his knee.
So on their horses and away they swam.
Oh, but they swam so thwift — so swiftly.

16 Then up and spoke the youngest brother,
He says, “Brother John, dae you see what I do see?
Thonder comes the sheriff bold
And twenty o his company.”

17 When the sheriff reached the Annan water
Oh, an angry man was he!
“Oh, cast me back my wee bit iron,
For noo you’ve got your brother free.”

18 Then up and spoke, oh, Brother John
Oh but he spoke boastfully,
“Oh, never a bit of iron you’ll get,
Oh never a bit you will get fae me.”

19 So on their horses and awa they swam,
Oh, but they swam swiftly.
And when they came to their village hall
Oh, there a dance that they did hae.
But the finest dancer among them all
Was the prisoner who was set free.

All: [*Sounds of appreciation and approval.*]

DW: That’s an old traditional ballad, ye know? It tells the story about how the brothers went to Dumfries and brought back their brother from jail, ye know. Big John’s a powerful man, and he

broke the doors down, ye know? An he carried his brother — It shows you what a person he was, in the story. It's a very old ballad; nobody sings it anymore. I'm the only one that sings it anymore, ye know?

HT: [*Comments on the fifty-pound weights; her words are hard to make out.*]

DW: And he had this — fifty pound, you know! Fifty pound weights on his leg, an they carried him wi weights and all! Big John must have been a powerful man.

HT, others: Right, yes.

DW = Duncan Williamson

HT = Holly Tannen

Appendix

What follows is a transcription of Williamson singing the same song on a different occasion, in July 1984, at the Williamsons' cottage near Strathmiglo, Fife. Present were Duncan Williamson, his wife Linda, their children Betsy and Thomas, and John Niles. Jimmy and Nancy Williamson (Duncan's son and daughter-in-law from his first marriage) were also present during part of this session.

DW: Listen to this one; this is a better one!² This is back a long time in the Borders when the Border reivers was very strong, and they fought in lands down through the Borders when Scotland was fightin against England. There was the Maxwells and the Andersons. They had fought warfare against the English, but they kept friends with the Scots. But one of the Armstrongs was taken a prisoner and he was thrown in a dungeon. He was thrown in a dungeon, an his brothers had made up their mind that they were gonnæ rescue him and bring him back to Scotland.

This is a great traditional ballad, and you ain't gonnæ hear this anymore from nobody! And it all began with a young woman who sat one night by her father's window in a evening. She didnae know nothing. She didnae know what was taking place, but she haird two brothers talking about what they were gonnæ do. And this is what she haird. [*Sings:*]

1 I luiked out o my father's window
Betwixt my garden and the wall,
And there I haird three brothers talking,³

² The reference to "a better one" is to the long ballad that Duncan has just finished singing, "Hind Horn."

³ This should properly be "two brothers talking," as in Duncan's spoken introduction and in other recordings of Williamson singing this song. The third brother is in Dumfries jail.

- Oh oh, but they talked so softly.
- 2 Sayin, “Our brother Tom, now, he lies in jail,
They mourns the day that he’s goin to dee,
But if I had twa men like mysel
Afore the cock crowed, oh, he’d be free.”
- 3 Then up an spoke the youngest brother,
Oh, but he spoke sae boastfully,
“Oh, take me with you, Brother John
And we will get our brother free.”
- 4 “Oh, haud your tongue, noo,” says Brother John,
“You dinnae ken it’s what you say.
I need three strong men like mysel
For to get our brother free.”
- 5 Then up and spoke the youngest brother,
Oh, but he spoke boastfully,
“Afore the cock cries in the morn
I’m sure our brother, he’s going to dee.”
- 6 “Gaa an get the horse,” says his brother John,
“And dinnae you wait a wee.
Afore the cock cries in the morn
Oh, we will get our brother free.”
- 7 So it’s on their horses and awa they rode,
Oh, but they rode swiftly,⁴
But when they came to the smitty door
They turned their horses’ shoes back forberly.⁵
- 8 Then on their horses and awa they rode,
Oh the three rode so swiftly,
It’s when they came to the Annan Water⁶
Oh, it was flowing like ony sea.
- 9 Then up and spoke the youngest brother,
Oh, that he spoke sae softly,

⁴ “Swiftly”: pronounced with three syllables, like “swiftily,” both here and elsewhere. The pronunciation of “softly” and briskly” in this song is likewise trisyllabic.

⁵ “Back forberly”: that is, back to front; “back forwardly” in other recordings.

⁶ The Annan Water: a river in southwest Scotland, east of Dumfries.

Sayin, "My horse is young and I cannae swim
Oh, Brother John, what will I dee?"

- 10 Then up and spoke, oh, Brother John,
Oh, but he spoke sae territy,⁷
"Climb up beside me," says Brother John,
"But dinnae let your bridle free."
- 11 So on their horses and awa they swam,
Oh, that they swam so briskly,
But when they came to Dumfries jail
It was just at the break of day.
- 12 So the first door that John come tae
I'm sure they made it gang in three.
The next door that John come tae
He opened it noo without a key.
- 13 Says, "Stand up, stand up, oh Brother Tom,
Oh, for it's you that I can see,
For I have come to Dumfries Jail
And I have come for to set you free."
- 14 "Oh, haud your tongue, noo," says Brother Tom,
"You cannae see what I can see.
There fifty pound o Swedish iron
Betwixt my ankle and my knee."
- 15 So he picked him up into his airms,
He carried him like a butterflee,
Wi twenty pound o Swedish iron⁸
Betwixt his ankle and his knee.
- 16 Then on their horses and awa they swam,
Oh, that they swam so swiftly.
Then up and spakes noo little Tom,
Oh, but he spoke sae swiftly:
- 17 "Look back, look back," sayin, "Brother John,
Oh, dae ye see what I do see?
Yonder comes there the sheriff bold
Wi twenty o his company."

⁷ "Sae territy": what Duncan means here is apparently something like "so manfully."

⁸ Duncan alternates between fifty and twenty pounds. The main point is that Brother John is the strong man of the three, the "heavy" one as it were.

18 When the sheriff reached the waterside
 Oh, an angry man was he,
 Shoutin, “Cast me back my wee bit iron,
 For noo you’ve got the prisoner free.”

19 Then up and spoke, oh, Brother John
 It’s laughin tae that he did say,
 “Oh, never a bit you’ll get frae me,
 Another prisoner you’ll never hae!”

20 So on their horses and awa they swam,
 Oh, that they swam so briskly,
 For they had come to Dumfries jail
 And they had gotten their brother free.

DW: This was a great Armstrong. The Armstrongs rode to Dumfries Jail and took their brother out of jail in the morning. This is “Archie o’ Cawfield,” as Child has it. But as the Travellers have it, it’s not that.

JN: What do you call it yourself?

DW: We call it “The Brothers.” Just “The Brothers.”

JN: And what are their names?

DW: There was John, Archie, and Tom. Three brothers, all Armstrong. He was charged for maybe cattle rustlin or sheep stealin or something, and he was put in Dumfries jail, and they wanted tae take him out of jail because he was gonnae be hung in the morning. He was going to be hung, but there was a lady who had heard them talkin who composed this song.

JN: The whole song?

DW: Well, ye ken, there’s many know it. They turned the horses’ shoes round about, “back forwardly,” you know, put the front to the back so if anybody saw if they passed, they would think they were going the opposite direction. It’s fantastic! It’s just out of this world! They changed the horses’ shoes all around. But it’s a fantastic story, it’s a lovely story. There are no many people around anymore that knows that version o “Archie o’ Cawfield.”

JN: Do you like that one better than “Hind Horn”?

DW: I like it better than “Hind Horn” because there’s more to it. You see the Travellers, a long time ago, respected courage, Jackie. They respected courage. I mean, there’s no courage in the ballad of “Hind Horn.” Because to be a Traveller, you had to have courage. To even *survive*, you had to have courage. There’s no courage in the “Hind Horn” ballad. He didnae need to do nothing; he only went away an sailed the sea. The captain was good tae him and cast him as a

first-class mate, an he sailed back. The only part that's interestin is when he met the tramp. But to take someone who goes down there an breaks the jail doon an takes out his brother from the jail — he's got fifty pound o Swedish iron bulgin on his leg, an he takes it an puts his brother on his back wi all his ball and chain and all — the Travellers respected courage, ye see!

DW = Duncan Williamson

JN = John Niles

Note

“The Brothers” is Duncan’s name for the ballad whose customary title is “Archie o’ Cawfield” (Child no. 188; Roud no. 83). The song is rare in twentieth-century tradition, although it crops up in earlier folksong collections and in the broadside press. The earliest recorded text is one that was sent to Bishop Percy in 1780, written out in no fewer than 45 stanzas (Child’s A text, vol. 3, pp. 487–89). I have not found evidence that the song was in the repertory of any other singer of Williamson’s generation. Its themes of fraternal solidarity and a prison-break have a perennial appeal, however, as does its final taunting of the authorities. Williamson sang the song in a highly improvisatory manner, as one can see by comparing this 1984 version of the song with four others. These are (1) a recording that Linda Williamson made in 1976 that can be heard at the website *Tobar an Dualchais / Kist o Riches*; (2) a recording that Mike Yates made in 2001 and that is available in his book *Traveller’s Joy: Songs of English and Scottish Travellers and Gypsies 1965–2005* (English Folk Dance and Song Society, 2006), no. 6, pp. 45–47; and (3 & 4) two other recordings made by John Niles, on his tapes 86DW43 (reproduced above) and 87DW07.

These four performances tell the same story at roughly the same pace and length, all the while maintaining the same loose formal scheme with its persistent terminal rhyme or assonance. At the same time, Duncan fits his words to the tune in a fluid manner, sometimes in stanzas of unequal length, while the wording of a given stanza varies unpredictably from one performance to the next. In other words, each performance appears to have been composed on the spot out of familiar elements. There may be no better example than this of flexible “storytelling in song,” though Williamson’s handling of the long ballad “Hind Horn” is comparable. These observations have a bearing on the claim (made by David Buchan in his 1972 book *The Ballad and the Folk*, though disputed) that an oral-formulaic method of composition involving the remaking of songs in the process of singing them was characteristic of the Scottish ballad tradition in former days.