

TRANSCRIPTION

Duncan Williamson sings a revenant ballad, "The Cruel Grave"

ScottishVoicesProj.0380

[This tape was made during a recording session organized by John Niles and his research group at a rented house in Auchtermuchty, Fife, in August of 1986. Much of the event was recorded simultaneously on cassette recorder, reel-to-reel tape recorder, and videotape. The chief aim was to get good-quality recordings of a number of Williamson's songs. Present were Duncan Williamson, John Niles, and a half dozen visitors from North America.]

DW: You see, Marie,¹ to start with, love is a very fine thing. And sometimes people can carry love a wee bit too far, even beyond the grave.

So this tells a story of a young lady who was in love with a young sailor, and he was gone in the sea. He had sailed away, and he was gone for many many years. He was gone for many months, he was gone for years. But she still loved him, she could not forget him. And during the night she used to lie in her bed, praying to almighty God to send him back home to her. But unknown to her, he had been drowned at sea. And when someone is dead, they're supposed to be forgotten, and let them sleep in peace. But with her prayin every night for God to send him back, his soul could not rest. So one night his spirit came back to her tae tell her to give him peace. And this is what happened. [*Sings:*]

- 1 Oh it's seven long years since my true love left me,
It is seven long years since he went to sea;
But another seven I will wait his pleasure,
Till he comes home and he marries me.
- 2 Now I lie in my bed and I often wonder,
I lie in my bed and I often pray,
I pray to my dearest God in Heaven,
Would he send my true love back home tae me?
- 3 Now who-who is that there that's at my window?
He is keeping me out of my night's rest.
It is not my father, it is not my mother
Who is keeping me out of my night's rest.
- 4 He said, "Open your door, love, oh let me in, love;
Will you open your door, will you let me in?
For I am cold, love, and I am weary,

¹ Marie Jeffress, one of the more elderly members of the research team present on this occasion. Williamson has deliberately included her by name, as she was seated right next to him, and he often singled out individual members of his audience for special acknowledgment.

And I am wet to the very skin.”

- 5 So she opened the door with the greatest of pleasure,
 She opened the door and she let him in;
 She said, “If you’re my Willie, you have changed your color,
 You’re not like the young man I used tae know.”
- 6 So they got talking and went walking
 Intil the small cock he began to crow;
 He said, “I must away, dear, I can stay no longer,
 Oh for it’s a far way I have to go.”
- 7 She said, “Willie, love, oh please don’t leave me;
 Willie dear, don’t go back to sea;
 Oh Willie, love, oh please don’t leave me;
 Oh Willie, won’t you stay with me?”
- 8 He said, “I must away, dear, I can stay no longer,
 For it’s a far way I have to go;
 But when I’m gone, dear, please pray no longer,
 For never more can I come home to you.”

DW: The idea of the cock: when the cock crows at five o’clock in the morning, all spirits must be home before the sun rises, d’you see? That’s why I said, “When the small cock he began to crow,” it means it tells ye, “all evil must be gone when the sun rises.” Well, all spirits must back to rest when the sun rises in the mornin. The small cock crows at five o’clock. The small cock means the little cock crows at five o’clock. He knew it was time for him to go back to his grave. And she begged him not tae go, but he had tae go. And the only thing he wanted — to pray no more. Just give him rest for evermore.

It’s called “The Cruel Grave.” It’s a good old traditional ballad. I got the cup for that in Auchtermuchty.²

Note

One of Williamson’s personal favorites, this is an example of a night-visiting song: one in which a lover — whether as a revenant or while still living — comes unexpectedly to his beloved’s door or window, often in dismal weather, to exchange words with her, but must depart before dawn. Songs of this type, which are generally grouped under Roud no. 22567, were common productions of the nineteenth-century broadside press and have long been favorites in oral tradition in Scotland and elsewhere in the world. Gavin Greig collected a song of the type from a

² Williamson’s reference is to a competition in various genres of traditional music held annually at the Auchtermuchty Festival, Fife, during previous years, one in which he often took part. The cup he won in this instance would have been for men’s traditional singing.

Miss Henderson in 1906: see “Open and Let Me In,” in *Songs from North-East Scotland*, ed. Katherine Campbell (John Donald Press, 2009), no. 32, p. 57. Elizabeth Stewart’s version of a song of the type (influenced by Williamson’s version, possibly) is published in her book *Up Yon Wide and Lonely Glen*, compiled and edited by Alison McMorland (University Press of Mississippi, 2012), no. 30, pp. 104–05). Williamson has remarked that the first time he sang “The Cruel Grave” in public, after having learned it first of all from his grandmother Bett MacColl in the region of Loch Fyne, was when he was visiting the island of Islay while in his teens: see David Campbell, *A Traveller in Two Worlds*, vol. 1 (Luath, 2011), pp. 162–64. John Niles recorded Williamson singing it on numerous occasions in addition to the present one. It is recorded on his tapes 84DW02, 86DW07, 86DW36 (along with videotape 86V04), 87DW07, 88CEIL02, and 88DW02.

Appendix

The following remarks about how otherworldly spirits disappear when the cock first crows in the morning are from a recording made on another occasion, in July 1984 in the sitting room of the Williamsons’ cottage near Strathmiglo, Fife. (Niles tape 84DW02 @18:45.)

DW: The Travellers believe that evil spirits had to go before the cock crowed in the morning. I tell you one thing, Johnny, listen to this. If you are ever left on your own in this world and you are afraid, and you don’t know what’s gonnae happen, once the cock crows in the morning, the evil is gone and there’s no more evil left. Cause the cock crows to celebrate the comin of the morning, and there’s no way in the world you need to be afraid because morning has arrived.

Travellers believe that. You don’t believe this? I knew Travellers sittin up all night listenin till the cock crows, sittin crackin, tellin stories, and they wouldnae go to sleep — I swear on my mother’s grave and my father’s grave — they wouldnae put their head down on a blanket till the cock crowed in the mornin. Oncet the cock crowed — three o’clock, the cock crows at three, some cock crows at four or five — the evils was gone. The spirits was gone, the evil was gone. They werenae afraid of anybody doing them any harm.

Dinnae think for a minute they were afraid o somebody coming to attack them! That wasnae the idea at all. [It was] the supernatural world and living in another world, you see what I mean?

LW: Ah, but when you live in a tent, it’s so close, it’s so close. It really is present.

DW = Duncan Williamson
Johnny = John Niles
LW = Linda Williamson