

## TRANSCRIPTION

### Duncan Williamson sings the ballad “True Thomas” (version 2)

ScottishVoicesProj.0517

[This recording was made in July 1986 at a rented house in Auchtermuchty. Present were Williamson, John Niles, and eight members of Niles’s research team. There is some cross talk during the first part of this excerpt as cups of tea are prepared.]

DW: You see, Thomas Rhymer was a village fool. An he was classed in the village as just a village fool. An he lay out in the woods an he wouldnae either work nor want. And then people just used tae treat him just as the village fool, as they say. Then one day Thomas was gone. He completely disappeared from the village. He was gone. People wondered where he’d fallen in the river or something. Thomas was forgotten about. Then seven years later, Thomas comes back tae the village, the same person as he was, not a day older, an lands in the village. He became one of the great seers in Scotland. An he foretold all these wonderful things. An he said, “Some day, the Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea will meet.” He said they would call Thomas a fool. But it happened! You take the Caledonian Canal: goes from the North Sea tae the Atlantic Ocean.

All: [*Laughter.*]

DW: An another thing. Thomas swore tae this, bein a great seer. He said, “This country will become in ruin when two women rules over airth.” Now that’s long before Maggie Thatcher ever came — !

All: [*Much laughter.*]

DW: It’s true, Jack! Long before Maggie Thatcher an the Queen ever came. Thomas the Rhymer was around in the 1500s, you know. An he said that, an many other wonderful things he’d foretold. [*Aside to a participant in the session who has given him a cup of tea:*] Thank you, dear.

JN: [*An aside to another participant regarding where best to place the microphone now:*] — Over here, all right?

DW: It tells a story, but I’d better let ye hear it, see what ye think of it. I’m no singer, remember; just a traditional singer. An this is how “Thomas the Rhymer” really went. [*Clears throat; sings:*]

1 True Thomas he lay on-a Huntly Bank  
Beneath an eilton tree,  
Oh, when he saw a lady fair  
Comin ridin ower the lea.

- 2 Oh Thomas, he doffed off his hat,  
He got down upon his knee,  
He said, "Lady, you're the greatest queen  
That ever I did see."
- 3 "Oh no, oh no, oh Thomas," she said,  
"That name does not belong to me.  
For I have come from Elfinland,  
I have come to visit thee.
- 4 "And you maun come, oh Thomas," she said,  
"You maun come along wi me.  
For I am bound for Elfinland,  
It is very far away.
- 5 "Mount you up, oh Thomas," she said,  
"And come along wi me,  
For we are goin to Elfinland,  
It is very far away."
- 6 So they rode and they rode, and they merrily merrily rode,  
And merrily they rode away,  
Intil they came to a crystal river  
That lay across their way.
- 7 "What river is this?" oh Thomas, he said,  
"Oh please tae me do say."  
"This is the river of tears," she said,  
That is spilled on this airth in one day."
- 8 So they rode and they rode, an they merrily merrily rode,  
And merrily they rode away,  
Intil they came to a red river  
That lay across their way.
- 9 "What river is this?" oh Thomas, he said,  
"Oh please tae me do say."  
"This is the river of blood," she said,  
That is spilled on this airth in one day."
- 10 So they rode and they rode, an they merrily merrily rode,  
And merrily they rode away,  
Intil they came to a thorny road  
That lay across their way.
- 11 "What road is this?" oh Thomas, he said,

“Oh please tae me do tell.”  
“This is the road you must never lead,  
For this road it leads to hell.”

- 12 So they rode and they rode, an they merrily merrily rode,  
And they rode for a year and a day,  
Intil they came to a great orchard  
That lay across their way.
- 13 “Light down, light down,” oh Thomas he said,  
“Oh, it’s hungry that I maun be.”  
“Light down, light down,” oh Thomas he said,  
“For some fine apples I do see.”
- 14 “Oh, touch them not,” the elfin queen said,  
“Please touch them not, I say.  
For they are made from the curses  
That fall on this airth in one day.”
- 15 So reachin up into a tree  
Into a tree so high,  
She plucked an apple from a tree  
As they went ridin by.
- 16 “Oh, eat you this, oh Thomas,” she said,  
“As we go ridin by,  
Ond it will give to you a tongue  
That will never tell a lie.”
- 17 So they rode and they rode, and they merrily merrily rode,  
And merrily they rode away,  
Intil they came to a great valley  
That lay across their way.
- 18 “What place is this?” oh Thomas he said,  
“Oh please to me do say.”  
“Oh this is Elfinland,” she said,  
“And it’s here that we maun stay.”
- 19 So Thomas got some shoes of lovely brown,  
And a coat of elfin green,  
And for seven long years and a day  
On airth he was never seen.

DW: That is the traditional ballad of “True Thomas,” how he disappeared with the fairy queen and how he came back as a great seer.

All: [*Applause*, words of commendation.]

{The excerpt continues for another thirty seconds or so with comments by Duncan on how this was a true story and Thomas was a genuine prophet.}

[Later in this same recording, after a tea break, in a part of the interview that is not excerpted in *Scottish Voices*, Duncan tells a bit more about Thomas and who he was. This exchange is transcribed here for its related interest. DW = Duncan Williamson, HT = Holly Tannen, JN = John Niles.]

HT: And they call him Thomas of Ercildoun?

DW: Everyone claims to have their own version of “Thomas” — in the Borders it’s Ercildoun. And an elton tree is a thorn tree. It’s just Scots for “thorn tree.”

DW: You’ve got different people who claim that Thomas really belonged to the Borders. Now in Aberdeenshire, Thomas came from Huntly. Huntly Green. That’s where Thomas is supposed to have lay, Huntly Green. “True Thomas he lay on Huntly Green, beneath an elton tree.” People say there used to be hundreds of big thorn trees in Huntly Green. They’re all gone now. And in the Borders, they claim that they own Thomas the Rhymer.

Aberdeenshire claims that years later, two white harts came back through the village, an people notified Thomas that there were two white deers in the village. An Thomas says, “I must see that.” An then Thomas disappeared with the two white deers and he was gone forever. Never came back. That’s another version of the story.

JN: What’s that about the two deer, Duncan?

DW: A hart — a stag and a white deer came back years later tae Huntly. An they walked through the village. An someone came an told Thomas that a white hart was in the village. It’s amazin to see two white deers in the village, ye know? An Thomas said, “I must see this.” An he ran down the street after them, and then — he was gone. He never came back any more, he disappeared. The Elfin Queen came back tae take him away back tae Elfland for good.

This is the story as they believe it in Aberdeenshire, ye know? She finally came back for him at last. That was the end of Thomas Rhymer. No one knows any more after that. So it’s one of these untold mysteries, ye know? Thomas the Rhymer.

JN: Did you learn the song first as a song, or as a story?

DW: I haird it told as a story, an then I heard an old man who sang a version to me as I sung it to you. That’s the way he sang it tae me, an that’s the one I keep to. From Aberdeenshire. He’s

dead now, but I keep his song goin. He died about ten years ago. He was an old travelling man. In all my travels, he's the only one I ever heard could sing it. The raises and the falls of the tune is very very old, ye know?

## Appendix

### More about the legendary seer Thomas Rymer

transcribed from tape 84DW02 @ 0:28 (not excerpted in Scottish Voices)

DW: You see, there are many, many stories of Thomas the Rhymer, but no one really knows the whole truth, who Thomas Rhymer really was.

They call him “Thomas the Rhymer” because they say he was a poet, but he was no poet at all. It was not “Rhymer”; it was *Rymer*, Thomas *Rymer*. And his father<sup>1</sup> was an old clock-maker who made clocks in Aberdeenshire. Well, people has different stories. Maybe my story's not true, but my story's as good as anyone else's story.

All: [*Laughter.*]

DW: Thomas was a man who was reared up by his grandfather when his people, his mother and father, died when he was very young. And his grandfather, who loved him dearly, gave him nothing to do in the world, and he lived in a village in Aberdeenshire. This is the story that *I* know, and there's nothing else in the world gonnae make me feel different! His grandfather made clocks, all kinds o clocks. Mended clocks and sorted clocks.<sup>2</sup> And Thomas, jist like a wee boy, helped his grandfather, but his grandfather gave him all the time in the world to do anything he wanted to do.

But Thomas's most important thing was to go out into the village and lie in the sun and enjoy his health to his heart's content. Now the people in the village, because he didnae work or didnae do nothing, when he grew up they all thought he was stupid and — ken — a wee bit knockit in the head, see? They paid little attention to him. They didnae think much of him. And he wandered around the village in his spare time when he wasnae lyin under the trees, an people give him little thought. But one day, when he went out to the moor an lay in the moor, he saw this beautiful lady coming ridin through the moor on horseback, this beautiful lady.

[*Sings:*] Her tresses it was of the forest fair. . . .

She was so beautiful! He thought it was the queen coming, you see? He thought it was the queen. Thomas got his hat off, and she tuik him away to elfin land. For seven years he disappeared, and the whole village was upset. He disappeared complete off the world. But when he come back after seven years, he prophesized. He was a great seer and he prophesized everything in the

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<sup>1</sup> Duncan probably meant to say “grandfather” here.

<sup>2</sup> “Sorted clocks”: that is, he sorted them out, got them to work if their parts needed fixing.

world, and people began to believe that Thomas the Rhymer *did* go to elfin land. But nobody really knows to this time in Aberdeenshire yet where he spent the seven years.

He was gone for seven years, but his grandfather was still alive when he came back. And when he came back he says, “Grandfather, why are you doing this? Why did you no make a wall clock?” You know what I mean? They werenae invented, clocks in the wall werenae invented then! He told his grandfather, he says, “Why don’t you make them, Grandfather?” And he saw this Caledonian Canal and all these things.

But there’s another story, a better story than that. (This is something that you don’t know; nobody’ll ever know.) When the fairy queen tuik Thomas the Rhymer back to elfin land, the king of the fairies got jealous. He got jealous past the common; he was jealous! “You don’t need to go into this land,” he says. “Have I not got enough for you?” You don’t need to bring somebody back to you.” (This is a secret between me, you, an Linda.<sup>3</sup>) He said, “Why do you need to go and —”

“Well,” she said, “I needed somebody who would listen to me. Cause, you see, you are dull!” she told the elfin king. “You are dull!” she said. (This is true, Linda.) “There’s no excitement for me,” she said. “You are so dull, I needed to bring —”

“Well, bring the man who is not dull before me,” said the elfin king. (This is true! You dinnae ken about this.) And he brought Thomas the Rhymer before the king o elf, and Thomas sat him doon at the table before the king o elf. And the king turned around and he looked at Thomas the Rhymer, an he knew where he come from, you see?

“And *you*,” he said, “is supposed to be superior to me! You are supposed to be the bright one; Ah’m supposed to be dull!” An he said, “Ma queen doesnae want me. My queen doesnae think that I’m superior to you. But I’ll tell you something, Thomas,” he said. “You’ll never be superior in here, in *my* land. But when you go back to your own people,” he said, “you’ll be above them all in the world. You’ll be superior to all of them.”

That’s why Thomas the Rhymer became a great seer, the greatest seer in the world.

But there’s a good story attached to Thomas the Rhymer you don’t know.

Thomas went to the well, ye know? He went to the well. His father told him this story about elves and people. And there was a big draw well in the village, and he used to [play] by the well. Every children was told, “Please, don’t go near the well! Don’t go near the well!” There was a draw well in the village where they drew their water. (John, it’s a long, long time ago, many hundreds o years ago.) But Thomas believed that down in the well there existed another world, you see, and he wanted to prove. (Noo this is no about the fairies; this is another story.) And Thomas fell intae the well. One day he fell in the well. He went down and down and down and down in the well. He was tuiken away; he didnae drown, he was tuiken away wi the elf. And they believed that he disappeared in the well. And then he tuik off. Then he tuik off. He

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<sup>3</sup> Duncan addresses this aside to John Niles and Linda Williamson, the two members of the listening audience on this occasion in the summer of 1984.

disappeared in the draw well, and that's when all his life began, in the draw well. But he came back. He came back again.

### Note

Duncan's version of this classic ballad (Child no. 37; Roud no. 219), one of his most impressive songs, has been printed with slight variations in wording in Duncan and Linda Williamson, *A Thorn in the King's Foot: Stories of the Scottish Travelling People* (Penguin, 1987) at pp. 253–56, with continuous musical transcription by Linda Williamson. Other recorded versions have been published by Alan Bruford, "Away with the Fairies," *Tocher*, pp. 175–77 (reprinted in Buchan, *Scottish Tradition*, pp. 143–46); and in Duncan Williamson, *The Horsieman: Memories of a Traveller 1928–1958* (Canongate, 1994), pp. 139–40 (words only). The folksong scholar Emily Lyle discusses Duncan's version of the ballad in her book *Fairies and Folk*, pp. 10–11. She comments that when he first started singing it, "Williamson did not know a traditional tune for the ballad and his version seems likely to have been worked up from print after a hearing of the story or a ballad fragment in a traditional context" (p. 10).