The Flowering Thorn

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In ballad scholarship and folk-song research in general, scholars often focus on the songs themselves and their collectors, rather than the singers who contributed them. This is especially true in historical research, where it is often difficult to gather sufficient information about singers. Knowledge about these individuals—the context in which a song was sung, the identity of the singer, the singer’s social circumstances, and the way the song was collected—allows a more holistic understanding of a particular song and indeed of a singing tradition at a particular point in time. Gavin Greig, the subject of this essay, who, together with the Reverend James Bruce Duncan, amassed more than three thousand texts and tunes from North East Scotland during the early years of the twentieth century, understood this better than most, noting that through folk song, “We get light thrown on the social life of the people—their occupations and interests, their amusements and recreations; while in the incidents and situations that have prompted and inspired the rustic muse local history may achieve record, or at least receive illustration” (Greig 1963a: 2).

The two singers introduced in this article, Mrs. Fowlie and Mrs. Duncan, each contributed songs to The Greig-Duncan Folk-Song Collection. Although they were not among Greig’s most prolific contributors, their circumstances are interesting to the scholar because the two women were related and both lived in New Deer Parish, where Greig did a good deal of his collecting. As well as examining the ballads that formed part of their repertoires, this investigation aims to highlight Greig’s activities as a collector.

Mary Ann Fowlie
Mary Ann Burr Fowlie was born 8 February 1870 at Brucehill, New Deer and died 6 July 1949 at the Mill Inn, Maryculter, owned at the time by her daughter Myra and her husband. She was the daughter of Peter Burr, a farm servant usually resident at Auchreddie, and Isabella Dickie, Auchmunziel, New Deer, who married...
in 1869. As a young woman, Ann Burr, as she was commonly known, married Alexander Fowlie, a farmer. Alexander had started work early in life because his father had died young.\textsuperscript{1} When Gavin Greig was collecting, the Fowlies were living at Ironside, Bonnykelly, Aberdeenshire. Later they moved to Mid-Culsh Farm outside New Deer, presently owned by the McConnachie family.

According to Mrs. Fowlie’s grandson, Mr. Sandy Thow of Milltimber, to whom I am greatly indebted for information, she was a lady who commanded respect, “an old Edwardian type.” He also noted that she had eight children who lived, out of about thirteen. It is likely that Mr. and Mrs. Fowlie had a hard and busy life running the farm and looking after the family. There was still time left over for singing, however.

Mrs. Fowlie was a relatively young woman, approximately thirty-seven years old, when Greig took down songs from her singing in August and September of 1907. One wonders how Greig originally found out that Mrs. Fowlie sang and if, in fact, she was known to him prior to his beginning work on the collection. Certainly, the couple remained in touch with him after his collecting visits. In his weekly column in the \textit{Buchan Observer}, 4 February 1908, Greig records a donation of a “budget of songs” from Mr. Fowlie (mostly sung by his neighbor, Mr. Glennie), to whom four songs are attributed in the collection (Ob. 10\textsuperscript{4}).

Greig was a schoolmaster at Whitehill school some three miles north of New Deer, where he remained until his death on 31 August 1914 (Shuldham-Shaw
1981: viii), and it was Whitehill where his collecting work centered. He did not have far to travel to collect material from the Fowlies since Ironside, Bonnykelly, is only about half a mile to a mile away as the crow flies, a distance that Greig would probably have traveled on foot, and it is possible that he may have taken a short cut over the fields. As with the other contributors to the collection from whom he heard tunes, Greig did his preliminary noting of Mrs. Fowlie’s material in sol-fa—a system of teaching sight-singing which arose in England in the midnineteenth century (Scholes 1944)—before transcribing the tune into staff notation for the final copy. His collecting partner, Rev. James Bruce Duncan, also followed this procedure in his collecting (Shuldham-Shaw 1981: x). We have a copy of the sol-fa notation of “The Laird of Drum” in the case of Mrs. Fowlie, along with Greig’s fair copy of the same piece, which he entitles “I Canna Wash” (Fig. 2).³

![Fig. 2a. Greig’s sol-fa notation of “The Laird of Drum” (Argo 17, p. 14).](image1)

![Fig. 2b. Greig’s fair copy of “The Laird of Drum” (The Greig-Duncan Folk-Song Collection, 4: no. 835M). Reproduced courtesy of the University of Aberdeen.](image2)

Greig, who was organist of his parish church (Shuldham-Shaw 1981: ix), clearly had no difficulty in transcribing melodies; the books containing his sol-fa notation
exhibit surprisingly few deletions, indicating little doubt on his part about the
notes or rhythms of tunes. Although frowned upon today by some in edu-
cational circles, tonic sol-fa was very much in vogue in Greig’s time. His notations
also correspond very closely to the final copies, indicating that they gave him a
firm foundation for the later version and acted as more than just a memory aid.
Greig offers some clue about the process of collecting tunes, stating, “We have
to make grateful acknowledgement of the kind and patient way in which most
singers have submitted to the ordeal—a necessary one in the circumstances—
of singing, and singing, and singing, till every melody was duly noted” (Greig
1963b: 1; Ob. 180). Collecting folk songs may not have been altogether easy,
especially if only “most” (but not all) singers submitted to the ordeal graciously.

Greig collected a total of twenty-five songs from Mrs. Fowlie, and tunes are
given for all but one of them. They cover a variety of themes, but as with the
entire collection, the largest proportion of them deal with love and marriage. Among Fowlie’s repertoire are five Child ballads: “Binorie” (Child 10), “The Dowie Dens o’ Yarrow” (Child 214), “The Gypsy Laddie” (Child 200), “The Laird o’ Drum” (Child 236), and “Clyde’s Waters” (Child 216), all of which have tunes, though only one verse of each is given. Although Greig was very interested in
collecting ballads, noting in the Buchan Observer of 12 January 1909, for in-
stance, “I like very much to get copies of the old ballads, as they are dying out
faster than the songs” (Ob. 58), it is likely that neither the texts nor the tunes of
these versions were particularly interesting to him since he does not comment in
detail on them in his writings.

While the ballad versions that Mrs. Fowlie gave to Greig may not have been
outstanding, her singing clearly was. Although without audio recordings it is
difficult to tell what her vocal quality was like, we do have some descriptions of
her singing. Mary Ann Crichton, a helper of Greig’s who also taught at Whitehill
School, described her as “a very fine ballad singer” (Keith 1925: 284) and went
even further in her appraisal, noting, “Mrs. Fowlie has the genuine ballad ring in
her style of rendering the songs.” Crichton may be referring to Mrs. Fowlie’s
singing in general as having this “ballad ring,” not just her rendition of ballads.
Crichton continues, “She has just been singing over a few of those she gave Mr.
Greig and she is splendid. One can feel the fine intervals of the real article. It took
me back to the olden days when we used to go ahunting for the songs” (MS
2732/30/1, f. 5r). The use of the term “ballad ring” is interesting here. While we
cannot be sure precisely what Crichton meant, I expect that it conveyed the
sense she felt of both the oral tradition, of which Mrs. Fowlie was a part, and the
antiquity which came through her singing. Crichton’s use of the word “feel” in
the context of the intervals, where one expects instead the word “hear,” is also
noteworthy. This, I believe, relates to the feeling one experiences when singing expressively or listening to such singing. It is difficult to put into words but is described by some Traveller singers as the “conyach.”

Jane Duncan
Mrs. Jane Duncan was related to Mrs. Fowlie through their grandmother, Mrs. Mary Dickie (née Beaton), Millbrex, Fyvie (see the family tree). Mrs. Dickie is a particularly important figure as far as we are concerned because both her children, Isabella Burr (née Dickie) and John Dickie, got their songs from her.

Jane Dickie, later Mrs. Duncan, was also the daughter of a farm servant, born on 8 December 1855, fifteen years before Mrs. Fowlie, at the same place, Brucehill. On 2 February 1878, she married John Duncan, at that time an agricultural laborer in New Deer. At this point she was twenty-two years old and a domestic servant at Clockhill. She appears to have had a small family in comparison with her cousin; at the time of the 1891 census, four people were recorded in her home in New Deer: Jane, John Duncan (her husband, aged forty-three, a road contractor), John H. Duncan (a thirteen-year-old son), and Helen Dickie, an adopted daughter, aged nine and born in Strichen. Given her surname, Helen was probably a relative.

Mrs. Duncan contributed a substantial eighty-eight songs to the collection, nineteen of them with tunes and half of them on love and marriage. The method used to collect her material was quite different from the one Greig employed with her cousin, however. Greig received the words for many of her songs from Ernest Coutts, who took down what she remembered (Keith 1925: 283). Greig does not refer to Coutts by name in his writings concerning Mrs. Duncan in the Observer, preferring to call him “a mutual friend.” Coutts was, in fact, Greig’s son-in-law and had lodged in Mrs. Duncan’s home, where he no doubt heard her singing. Other songs appear to have been sent in by Mrs. Duncan herself, possibly inspired by Coutts’s work; the tunes for some of the songs were written down by Greig sometime later. Interestingly, all nineteen tunes were recorded at one time, the date of collection being around 6 September 1910 (Ob. 143).

These entries mostly contain several more stanzas than Mrs. Fowlie’s, although tunes are given for only two: “The Mermaid” (*Greig-Duncan Collection*, 4: no. 27A) and “The Keach in the Creel” (*Greig-Duncan Collection*, 2: no. 317D).

Greig acknowledged receiving several of these, including “The Mermaid” and “Binorie,” in his column (Ob. 143, 74) but does not comment in detail on her versions. He was, however, delighted to receive these ballad contributions as well as her other songs, noting, “From Mrs. Duncan, New Deer, per a mutual friend, I have got a capital budget of minstrelsy” (Ob. 71). In addition, he was happy to receive fragments as well as whole texts from her: “Some of these are complete, others are gleanings of memory, but all are very welcome and claim my sincere thanks” (Ob. 78). Mrs. Duncan’s version of “The Mermaid” is a fine one and is the A version in *The Greig-Duncan Folk-Song Collection*; it also appears in Bronson (1959–72: song 289, variant 16).

When the repertoires of Mrs. Fowlie and Mrs. Duncan are compared, despite the family song connection through their grandmother, which dates some of their repertoire back to the midnineteenth century, they have surprisingly few songs in common. It has to be said, however, that valid comparisons are difficult because of the differing number of verses they give for songs. Of the eight which they have in common, there are a few textual similarities in songs such as “The Rigs o’ Rye” (*Greig-Duncan Collection*, 5: no. 1054) and “The False Bride” (*Greig-Duncan Collection*, 6: no. 1198), and both tune and text are very similar in the one song which they have in common where a tune is given for both, “The Auld Gardener’s Wife” (*Greig-Duncan Collection*, 6: no. 1262). In the one Child ballad that they share, “Binorie” (Child 10), there are slight similarities, although Mrs. Duncan supplies ten stanzas with no tune (*Greig-Duncan Collection*, 2: no. 213U), whereas Mrs. Fowlie offers a tune but only one stanza (213I). Mrs. Fowlie’s stanza runs,

Oh sister, O sister, give to me your hand,
Binorie O and Binorie;
And ye’ll get the miller for your true love,
Binorie O and Binorie.

This corresponds quite closely to Mrs. Duncan’s fourth stanza:

Oh sister, oh sister, come reach me your hand,
Binorie oh, an’ Binnorie;
And I’ll give you all that is at my command,
But the bonnie mullert lad o’ Binorrie.
The proportion of Child ballads in Mrs. Duncan’s and Mrs. Fowlie’s repertoires—about one-sixth of the former’s, one-fifth of the latter’s—demonstrates that each had a mixed repertoire of folk song and balladry. The fact that the two singers had little in common in their overall song repertoires, however, is interesting, particularly since Mary Ann Crichton, who enthusiastically explained the family connection between the two in her notes for Alexander Keith when he was preparing *Last Leaves*, evidently expected more of a link. While this can be explained by the singers remembering songs differently, resulting in different songs being sung for collectors, it does illustrate the point that songs are often not passed from one generation to the next as one expects. Indeed, Mrs. Fowlie’s daughter, Myra, Sandy Thow’s mother, is a good example. Although Myra was well known as a singer in her local area, Mr. Thow did not recognize any of Mrs. Fowlie’s songs in her repertoire; he said she sang a lot of Burns songs as well as popular material made famous by performers such as Vera Lynn.

Greig’s collecting methods, as we have seen, were varied and included gathering material in the field, having singers come to his home, appealing for songs in his column in the *Buchan Observer*, and getting submissions through envoys such as Coutts, who greatly assisted his efforts. While many people helped him in his collecting work, Greig had rather harsh words for certain parties who did not, especially musicians. “When we began our folk-song work, we thought that our musical friends would be specially helpful in recording tunes for us. One or two have aided us much; but we have to say that, as a rule, musicians—we mean people with a good deal of technical training—have done little or nothing for the work” (Ob. 180). Volume eight of *The Greig-Duncan Folk-Song Collection* (2002) contains further notes on Greig’s methods and those who contributed songs. As well as being informative for scholars, these notes are helpful to singers wishing to know more about the sources of songs, which undoubtedly helps them perform more effectively.

The fact that Mrs. Duncan and Mrs. Fowlie lived in the same parish is important in terms of *The Greig-Duncan Folk-Song Collection* as a whole, especially because Greig also lived there, which gave him ready access to local singers. In areas like Aberdeenshire, where close-knit communities are the rule and kinship ties are important, it has been possible to piece together details about the pair, particularly Mrs. Fowlie, through information from relatives and neighbors. Although there are gaps in my understanding of the singers and their singing—how often they sang, for instance—this kind of historical research, which I have only touched upon here, surely yields rich rewards, particularly in helping us understand intensely local traditions.
Notes

1. I am most grateful to Mr. Jim Shirer, Aberdeen and North East Scotland Family History Society, for this information.
2. Marriage record 1869/225/1 (Scottish Record Office).
3. Information from Mr. Thow, Milltimber.
4. The abbreviation “Ob.” will henceforth refer to the number of Greig’s column, “Folk-Song of the North East,” that appeared in the Buchan Observer from 1907 to 1911. These articles can be found in Greig 1963b.
5. Mrs. Fowlie’s tunes are transcribed in the manuscript notebook Argo 17, formerly owned by Arthur Argo and now available in as originals and copies at Aberdeen University Library (MSS 3088/26/17) and at the School of Scottish Studies Archive, department of Celtic and Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh.
7. Birth record 1855/225/123 (Scottish Record Office).
8. Marriage record 1878/225/2 (Scottish Record Office).
9. It is probable that he took over this business from his father, Alexander Duncan, also a road contractor.

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