

***Till Doomsday in the Afternoon: The Folklore of a Family of Scots Travellers, The Stewarts of Blairgowrie.* Ewan MACCOLL and Peggy SEEGER, eds. (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1986. Pp. xi + 325, \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 0-7190-1813-7)**

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Volume 9, Number 1-2, 1987

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081438ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081438ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Buchan, D. (1987). Review of [*Till Doomsday in the Afternoon: The Folklore of a Family of Scots Travellers, The Stewarts of Blairgowrie*. Ewan MACCOLL and Peggy SEEGER, eds. (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1986. Pp. xi + 325, \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 0-7190-1813-7)]. *Ethnologies*, 9(1-2), 113–115.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1081438ar>

Reviews/Comptes rendus

Till Doomsday in the Afternoon: The Folklore of a Family of Scots Travellers, The Stewarts of Blairgowrie

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Since 1950 folklorists have been recording a wealth of traditional material from the Scottish Travellers, a group who formerly existed on the periphery of society. The Travellers probably descend from nomadic Celtic workers in tin (in which a contemporary like Willie MacPhee can still demonstrate the inherited skill) but in more recent centuries they earned their living by hawking (selling small items), pearl-fishing, busking, begging, and doing a variety of rural jobs, while they travelled round the countryside for at least half the year with horse and cart, living in their distinctive bow-tents. Many received only the barest of official educations. Fortified by a strong sense of family and group, the Travellers kept themselves apart from the settled "hantle" (a cant term) who regarded them for the most part as outcasts: as the tinkers, tinkies, or cyairds. Yet this subcultural group, occupying the lowest rung on the social ladder, has retained in rich measure the expressive practices and materials of Scottish tradition largely jettisoned by mainstream society. From the Travellers in the past 30-40 years have been recorded magnificent Märchen and "muckle sangs" (the emic term for the classical ballads): Duncan Williamson, for example, performs a splendid version of "Thomas Rymer" (CH 37), last collected in the early nineteenth century. The aim of *Till Doomsday in the Afternoon* is to "present an accurate picture of a traditional cul-

ture operating inside the somewhat confined space of a family circle," the family being one well-known through the Revival and delimited for the book's purposes to Alec Stewart (1904-1980), Belle Stewart (b. 1906), and their daughters, Cathie Higgins and Sheila MacGregor. The family, though localised in Perthshire, has a very specific link with Canada, for Alec's youngest brother Andrew emigrated to Ontario, and has there been recorded by Edith Fowke.

Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger, themselves well known figures of the Revival, recorded the Stewart family between 1962 and 1979, and have organised the repertoire in sections devoted to folktales, songs, "mak-ye-ups" (songs and verses composed by Belle once her children were grown up and married), children's rhymes and catches, and riddles. The folktales include a variety of generic forms: animal tale, Märchen, religious tale, novella, comic tale, legend, personal experience narrative, and "Burkers" (so called after Burke and Hare the body-snatchers) which seem to have articulated particular fears and anxieties among the Traveller community. Particularly striking are two tales which defy ready generic categorization or standard type-numbering: Belle Stewart's "The Laddie that Became a Lass" and Cathie Higgins's "Sheep's Turlies". The former, within the Märchen-framework of the task, welds unusual variations of the fairy-abode-visitation and the selchie woman legends in a story where the hero changes sex, bears three children, and turns back into a man again.

The songs display likewise a catholic breadth of genre: classical ballads, broadside ballads, Irish songs, local songs, bawdy songs, sentimental songs, bothy songs, music-hall songs. For the songs, as for the children's rhymes, the editors provide comparative references, and quite a few (about a dozen of the seventy-odd titles) have no listed parallel versions, which gives some indication of the individuality of the repertoire. One of these is, as the editors rightly declare, a "brilliant urban parody of 'The Dying Soldier' "; another, "Ballyjamesduff," is by Percy French of "Abdul the Bulbul Ameer" fame. Along more conventionally traditional lines are the texts and tunes of Belle's superb renditions of "The Twa Brothers" (CH 49), "The Fause Knight Upon the Road" (CH 3), and "The Bonnie Hoose o Airlie" (CH 199). Here and there small doubts raise themselves about the accuracy of the transcription. The "Smarendale Rye" in the refrain line of "Geordie Weir" surely has as its final vocables Dalry the town in Ayrshire. And in Sheila's story "The Vinegar Bottle" (AT 555 var.) where line 7 makes no sense as it stands, the word "died" (pron. deid) must be "deaved" (deafened by verbal nagging).

Laudably, the editors decided that for a full understanding the texts “needed the context of the family’s particular way of handling words”, which they provide in two ways. First, they have a section on the cant, the Travellers’ private mode of communication; the vocabulary list however contains a number of standard Scots words and one or two from the Gaelic found in Scots usage. The other way of providing the context is highly successful: the editors furnish extended transcriptions of the family talking—about their lives, the old Traveller way of life, harassment, the radical changes in Traveller lifestyle, and the effects that fame has wrought on the family. These vigorous and fluent disquisitions supply not simply a context to the handling of words but also the context of the group’s culture.

It is, however, in the provision of contexts that the scholarly apparatus could be faulted. There is no indication that folklorists have collected extensively from the Travellers in recent decades, or that other collectors have recorded the Stewarts, both the four represented here and other members of the family, past and present; and there is no discographical reference to their records. A large comparative context is, consequently, ignored. The bibliographic apparatus is likewise a touch erratic. It omits any mention of *Tocher* which has printed both much material from and special features on Traveller performers, (including one on the Stewarts), or Hugh Gentleman and Susan Swift’s book *Scotland’s Travelling People*, or Betsy Whyte’s engaging Traveller autobiography *The Yellow on the Broom*, or the first two volumes of the mammoth Greig-Duncan Folksong Collection (the Rev. J.B. Duncan collected from the Travellers) although it does list Peacock, Greenleaf & Mansfield, and Roy Mackenzie.

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