

RATTLIN ROARIN WILLIE — THE SONGS — I

Robert Burns' version of *Rattlin Roarin Willie* was first printed as Song No. 194 in *The Scots Musical Museum* (Vol. 2, Edinburgh, 1788) and has been widely anthologised since. Here are the lyrics:

RATTLIN, ROARIN WILLIE

O Rattlin, roarin Willie,
O he held to the fair,
An' for to sell his fiddle
And buy some other ware;
But parting wi' his fiddle,
The saut tear blin't his e'e;
And Rattlin, roarin Willie
Ye're welcome hame to me.

O Willie, come sell your fiddle,
O sell your fiddle sae fine;
O Willie, come sell your fiddle,
And buy a pint o' wine;
If I should sell my fiddle,
The warl' would think I was mad,
For mony a rantin day
My fiddle and I hae had.

As I cam by Crochallan
I cannily keekit ben,
Rattlin, roarin Willie
Was sitting at yon boord-en',
Sitting at yon boord-en',
And amang guid companie;
Rattlin, roarin Willie,
Ye're welcome hame to me.

Here is the melody with the first verse, copied from the *Museum*. The *Museum's* bass line has been followed to give the chord symbols added here.

S.M.M. SCORE AND MIDI FILE

It is well known that Burns only claimed to have written one verse of the song. He wrote:

"The last stanza of this song is mine and out of compliment to one of the worthiest fellows in the world, Willm Dunbar, Esq: Writer to the Signet, Edinr, and Colonel of the Crochallan Corps, a club of wits who took that title at the time of raising the fencible regiments."

[from Burns' notes in Robert Riddell's interleaved copy of the *Museum*, reproduced in the 1991 Scolar Press facsimile edition.]

What of the song before Burns? Who was the original Rattlin Roarin Willie? For me, the trail to some possible answers began in a surprising source, *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* by Iona and Peter Opie. In their note on the rhyme *Jacky, come give me thy fiddle*

http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~mjoseph/mother_goose/Jacky_Come_Give_Me_Your_Fiddle.htm

they quote the song as expanded by Burns and, not quite believing his own remarks, they write:

“the first stanza also, though not attributed to him, seems to bear his mark. The other, however, had possibly been alive on the breath of tradition for a century before the days of Burns. Scott alludes to Rattlin’ Roarin’ Willie (as ‘the jovial harper’) in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, and adds a note that he was a real person. Tradition says that he lived in the seventeenth century, a roaring, ranting boy, who did business in the Hawick and Langholm districts, until, having had the misfortune to murder a brother in trade who passed by the name of ‘Sweet Milk’, he was executed at Jedburgh. The original air which Burns collected is in Atkinson’s MS. (1694) and is cited in Ramsay’s *Miscellany* (1725). It was a great favourite, and often mentioned in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.”

It should not of course be taken that Atkinson’s manuscript, or any written version, was Burns’ source for the tune, which he would not have needed to collect at all if he knew it from oral tradition along with the old lyric; while the broad outline of Burns’ air and earlier instrumental versions is the same, none of the latter, including that in Oswald’s book which Burns is known to have consulted, match it in close detail.

Following the Opies’ lead to Scott’s note in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, we learn from Sir Walter:

“The person, here alluded to, is one of our ancient Border minstrels, called Rattling Roaring Willie. This soubriquet was probably derived from his bullying disposition; being, it would seem, such a roaring boy as is frequently mentioned in old plays. While drinking at Newmill, upon Teviot, about five miles above Hawick, Willie chanced to quarrel with one of his own profession, who was usually distinguished by the odd name of Sweet Milk, from a place on Rule-water so called. They retired to a meadow on the opposite side of the Teviot, to decide the contest with their swords, and Sweet Milk was killed on the spot. A thorn-tree marks the scene of the murder, which is still called Sweet Milk Thorn. Willie was taken and executed at Jedburgh, bequeathing his name to the beautiful Scottish air, called “Rattling Roaring Willie.” Ramsay, who set no value on traditionary lore, published a few verses of this song in the *Tea Table Miscellany*, carefully suppressing all which had any connection with the history of the author, and origin of the piece. In this case, however, honest Allan is in some degree justified, by the extreme worthlessness of the poetry. A verse or two may be taken as illustrative of the history of Roaring Willie, alluded to in the text.”

Here I should have liked to include the whole song, worthless or not, as published by Ramsay, but the eye-strain induced by two thorough searches through a late, 4-volume edition of his *Miscellany* yielded nothing more relevant than a song called *To L. M. M.* to be sung to the tune of *Rantin, roaring Willie*. It begins

O MARY! thy graces and glances,
Thy smile so inchantingly gay,
And thoughts so divinely harmonious,
Clear wit and good humour display,

and continues in the same vein, with never a mention of Willie. What it does tell us is that Ramsay considered the tune so well known that anyone who read his book would know it. (The *Miscellany* was published from 1724 but the first edition containing this song is believed to be that of 1733.) There is no trace in Ramsay of the song quoted by Scott, and none of its lines occur in any sources known with certainty to predate his note.

Here are the verses given by Scott, with his explanatory footnotes:

Now Willie's gane to Jeddart,
And he is for the rude-day*;
But Stobs and young Falnash†,
They followed him a' the way;
They followed him a' the way,
They sought him up and down,
In the links of Ousenam water
They fand him sleeping sound.

Stobs lighted aff his horse,
And never a word he spak,
Till he tie'd Willie's hands
Fu' fast behind his back;
Fu' fast behind his back,
And down beneath his knee,
And drink will be dear to Willie,
When sweet milk‡ gars him die.

Ah wae light on ye, Stobs!
An ill death mot ye die!
Ye're the first and foremost man
That e'er laid hands on me;
That e'er laid hands on me,
And took my mare me frae;
Wae to ye, Sir Gilbert Elliot,
Ye are my mortal fae!

The lasses of Ousenam water
Are rugging and riving their hair,
And a' for the sake of Willie,
His beauty was sae fair;
His beauty was sae fair,
And comely for to see,
And drink will be dear to Willie,
When sweet milk gars him die.

* The day of the Rood-fair at Jedburgh.

† Sir Gilbert Elliot of Stobs, and Scott of Falnash.

‡ A wretched pun on his antagonist's name.

It has become commonplace to accuse Scott of inventing when he is supposed to be reporting and, finding the citation of Ramsay as his source to be erroneous here, we might

wonder whether the lore associating Willie with Teviotdale and Jedburgh emanates from the imagination of the Bard of Abbotsford but, in regard to any doubts over Scott's honesty, I am advised by ballad scholar Poppy Holden that "Keith Harry's 1975 Aberdeen PhD thesis on Scott's sources stamps out that idea quite firmly. Harry looks very thoroughly into the matter and concludes that barely anything was altered — those ballads which Scott made up, he stated quite clearly were of his own invention."

So, Sir Walter is innocent. The source of his ballad is unexplained, but we can take it that the events he describes are informed by his own extensive local knowledge. His remarks on Ramsay ("carefully suppressing all which had any connection with the history of the author, and origin of the piece") can be taken to refer to the lyric Ramsay published and, presumably, wrote, and it is also this lyric rather than the ballad which Scott accuses of "extreme worthlessness".

Further versions of both the above songs are given by Allan Cunningham in *The Songs of Scotland, Ancient and Modern* (1825). Professor Veitch writes of Cunningham: "Our only regret is that he did not accurately distinguish the outflowings of his own wealth of genius from the older fragments of poetry which he found, and which he incorporated or transfused with his own." (*The History and Poetry of the Scottish Border*, 2nd edn., 1893).

Here is the song Cunningham either collected or reworked from the one quoted by Scott:

ROB ROOL AND RATTLIN WILLIE

Our Willie's away to Jeddart,
To dance on the rood-day,
A sharp sword by his side,
A fiddle to cheer the way.
The joyous tharms o' his fiddle
Rob Rool had handled rude,
And Willie left New-Mill banks
Red wat wi' Robin's blude.

Our Willie's away to Jeddart —
May ne'er the saints forbode
That ever sae merry a fellow
Should gang sae black a road!
For Stobbs and young Falnash
They followed him up and down —
In the links of Ousenam water
They found him sleeping soun'.

Now may the name of Elliot
Be cursed frae firth to firth! —
He has fettered the gude right hand
That keepit the land in mirth.
That keepit the land in mirth,
And charm'd maids' hearts frae dool;
And sair will they want him, Willie,
When birks are bare at Yule.

The lasses of Ousenam water
Are rugging and riving their hair,
And a' for the sake of Willie —
They'll hear his sangs nae mair.
Nae mair to his merry fiddle
Dance Teviot's maidens free:
My curses on their cunning,
Wha gaured sweet Willie die!

Cunningham wrote:

““Rattling Roaring Willie” has been long celebrated in Border story; he was a noted ballad-maker and brawler, and his sword-hand was dreaded as much as his bow-hand was admired. His fatal quarrel with the poet of Rule-water is noticed in the Lay of the Last Minstrel.”

Cunningham did apparently rework Burns' song, adding a stanza (“The third verse is now printed for the first time”), rewriting the only stanza Burns had claimed(!), and introducing a reference to Selkirk, probably as a nod to Sir Walter, who was once its Sheriff, and to whom he dedicated his book. Cunningham certainly did not lack confidence, but cannot be faulted on any grounds that would not apply equally to Burns, save only that Burns was more forthcoming about distinguishing his own work from tradition.

RATTLING ROARING WILLIE

Our Rattling Roaring Willie
Went off to Selkirk fair,
To sell his merry fiddle
And buy more thrifty ware.
But parting wi' his fiddle,
The saut tear dimm'd his ee:
I'll sell my sweet bread-winner,
And then lie down an' die.

Now, Willie, man, sell your fiddle —
Come sell your fiddle so fine:
O Willie, come sell your fiddle,
And buy a pint o' wine.
Were I to sell my fiddle,
The world would ca' me mad,
For monie a ranting day
My fiddle and I ha'e had.

I made my gallant fiddle
Of our repentance-stool;
The lasses went wild wi' laughing,
And danced frae Paste to Yule —
The doucest foot o' the parish
Has wagg'd to it wantonlie;
O monie's the mirthsome minute
My fiddle has made for me.

As I came in by Crochallan
I cannilie keeket ben,
An' Rattling Roaring Willie
Was sitting at our board en',
An' drawing his best bow-hand,
An' drinking the wine sae free —
O Rattling Roaring Willie,
Ye're welcome hame to me.

To return to Professor Veitch:

“The merit of identifying “Rattlin’ Roarin’ Willie” with a historical personage is due to the late Sir Walter Elliot of Wolflee. In a paper contributed by him to the *Transactions* of the Berwickshire Naturalists’ Club in 1886, he showed that the Willie of tradition and the ballad was ... “

And now, because Sir Walter Elliot did such a fine and thorough job, he will tell the story in his own words.