

Corbies and Laverocks and the Four and Twenty Blackbirds: The Montgomerie Legacy to Folklore and the Mother Tongue

MARGARET BENNETT

“The State of Play” was the title of a memorable conference held in Sheffield in 1998, with Iona Opie as the keynote speaker. Her long collaboration with her husband, Peter, and their book, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, had been the inspiration of those who filled the hall, and for some it marked a milestone in their lives – as John Widdowson humorously said, it had seduced him into folklore.¹ While the title of Dr Opie’s talk was “A Lifetime in the Playground” she began by explaining that the playground was not actually the starting point for their work; it was, rather, in books and library collections. The Opies shared a fascination with the history and provenance of nursery rhymes and when their seven year project led to the publication of *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* in 1951, the level of interest and success of the book was a turning point: “We decided to do something that had never been done before. We decided to ask the school children themselves ...”

The scale of their collecting, from Land’s End to Cape Wrath, their approach to the fieldwork, and the duration of their work “had never been done before” in Britain, though American folklorists had been audio-recording in playgrounds and streets since the 1930s.² Foremost among them was Herbert Halpert, who later introduced his students (of which I was one) to the work of Iona and Peter Opie in his Folklore classes at Memorial University of Newfoundland – *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (1959) was on the Required Reading List, to be purchased from the MUN Bookstore. Students were set the task of collecting “items” of childlore, from memory as well as from local children, and through the mandatory assignment we discovered the universality of childlore: “sure enough”, the Opies had a version of this, that or the other. As lecture notes scribbled in 1968 remind me, the “discovery” was affirmed by examples drawn by Professor Halpert from the student assignments: one version from St. John’s, another from an “outport”, then a recording played on a twelve-inch red acetate disc, of versions Halpert had collected in a New York suburb in 1938.³ The tracks included Halpert’s interviews with the children, who answered all the questions asked by the man with the microphone, who did not seem to know much about songs or games. It was a built-in lesson in techniques of interviewing, followed by instructions on how to classify the material.⁴

In 2017 the Folklore Department founded by Herbert Halpert celebrated its Fiftieth Anniversary and there is no doubt that his lectures inspired the work of folklorists on both sides of the Atlantic. Halpert taught his students to listen to their own people, to observe, record and document, and to recognise the extraordinary in what may have hitherto seemed very ordinary. His bibliographic skills and knowledge were, and are, legendary – I learned more about Scotland through his lectures than throughout my “good Scottish education”. On the subject of childlore, he directed students to sources which they “ought to know about” – Robert Chambers, *Popular Rhymes of Scotland*, 1826, “you should all look at that” – then drew attention to the work of Scottish folklorists William and Norah Montgomerie, who began

collecting in the 1930s. Their first collection, *Scottish Nursery Rhymes*, was published in 1946, and in his article “Childlore Bibliography: A Supplement” (1982), Halpert notes that “The Montgomeries were the first in recent decades to stimulate interest in children’s rhymes.”⁵ In 1990, the Montgomeries introduced a reprint by explaining:

“Our first collections were published during the war and in the post-war years, since when the tide of Scottish language has ebbed further and left these sea-shells lying higher up the beach. But, like the sea urchins, we picked up on a Scottish shore, and still look at them with pleasure, they have lost none of their fascination. They should be shared with new generations of children whose heritage they are.”⁶

Over the years the Montgomeries’ collections of childlore have been published widely, and have become favourites among parents and children.⁷ Their books have an established reputation both nationally and internationally, yet, apart from a few American folklorists (including Alan Lomax)⁸ the Montgomeries themselves have seldom received the recognition from researchers that their work deserves. They formed a remarkable team, combining their interests, dedication, and meticulous attention to detail and scholarship while recording and documenting the rhymes, chants, singing games, and other playground lore.

The Montgomeries were interested in language acquisition and the importance of early childhood learning as a foundation for adult literacy and usage, particularly of Scots and all its dialects. In the preface to the first collection they advised that “these rhymes should precede the pleasure derived from the more mature folksongs and ballads. Indeed, their fundamental quality attunes young ears to all poetry.”

Reflecting on his own experience of starting school in Glasgow at the age of five, William Montgomerie (b. 1904) realised there was something amiss in an education system which banned the native speech of children, then challenged pupils to read and recite that language as it appears in literature from earlier centuries.⁹ As a student in Glasgow University in the early 1920s, he studied English Literature and became keenly aware that it was not his formal schooling that enabled him to appreciate ancient ballads or the fifteenth century Scots “makars”, but the language of his early childhood, at home and in the playground.

Montgomerie trained as a schoolteacher, began his career in Dundee, teaching English at a secondary school (eleven to eighteen year-olds) before moving to “higher education” to lecture at a community college. He resolved, however, to continue his collecting from oral tradition despite the lack of interest shown by colleagues in education. It might have been a lonely furrow to plough had it not been for the good fortune of meeting Norah Shargool, a young artist from London who worked with the Dundee newspaper empire of DC Thomson. Together they were to leave an enormous legacy which deserves recognition. In “telling their story” and sharing examples of their collections, this article aims to pay tribute to the Montgomeries, and to give an insight into their work, which is as important to “tradition today” as it was when they first began.

In writing this article I accord enormous gratitude to William (Bill) and Norah Montgomerie, whom I met in 1984 soon after joining the staff of the School of Scottish Studies

at the University of Edinburgh. In retirement, the Montgomerie family attended public seminars at the University, where Bill was often invited to participate in ensuing discussions. The School of Scottish Studies music research fellow Francis Collinson, who was appointed in 1951, wrote: “Dr. William Montgomerie brings scholarship of a high order to bear on the problems of Scottish song, nursery rhyme and ballad ... he moves in a field not so far touched by the School of Scottish Studies ...”¹⁰ Bill had a profound knowledge of literature in several languages, and became renowned for his expertise in the classic ballad.

Montgomerie was also highly regarded among Edinburgh’s literati – in the words of poet and novelist J. B. Pick, “a treasure house of information and a master of sharp perception. He shared light, not darkness, and his scholarship was meticulous.”¹¹ He was also a widely published poet,¹² and with Norah shared an interest in visual art and the theatre. They lived



Norah and Bill collaborating on a manuscript, early 1950s
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near the university, having moved from Dundee to Edinburgh after Bill’s retirement in 1973. There they continued to collaborate on folklore collections while taking time to enjoy a wide range of activities and a circle of friends among fellow poets, writers, actors, artists, and musicians of all ages. Outside of the university I met the Montgomerie family at poetry readings, art exhibitions, concerts, ceilidhs, “folk nights”, theatre, storytelling events, and informal visits which nurtured a friendship that lasted till Bill died in 1994 and Norah in 1998.

This article draws from discussions over those years, an archive recording made by William Montgomerie in a Dundee playground in 1952, a taperecorded interview with Norah in 1991,¹³ and letters from, and conversations with, their daughter Dian Elvin, as well as her essay, “William Montgomerie”, published online by the Scottish Poetry Library.¹⁴

Bill and Norah: Biographical sketches

William Montgomerie, son of Rachel (Sinclair) and John Montgomerie, was born in Glasgow on May 30th, 1904. He grew up in a strict, religious household as his father was a Plymouth Brethren evangelist, and did not allow his children to attend secular events such as parties, or even bring friends to the house. His father worked as a painter and decorator, except during the 1914-18 War when, being a pacifist, he was imprisoned as a conscientious objector. His strictness at home was not a reflection of harshness, but of his deep religious convictions.¹⁵ Among schoolfriends in neighbouring playgrounds and city streets, however, Bill enjoyed “a typical Glasgow schoolboy’s life, free to roam and fight, albeit often against his father’s orders.”

He would explore the surrounding countryside, looking at wildlife and nature in all around him. He loved books on history and literature and developed his own skills in creative writing and poetry. Montgomerie did well at school, so went on to Glasgow University where he studied English Literature, German, Chemistry, and other subjects. As mentioned, he graduated as a teacher, then moved to the industrial city of Dundee, once renowned for fleets of whaling vessels that docked there from the mid-1800s, for jute, jam and journalism – the “comic capital” of Scotland.

While still in his twenties, Montgomerie’s first book of poetry, *Via*, was published in London (Boriswood, 1933) with a second collection the following year: *Squared Circle: A Vision of the Cairngorms*.¹⁶ Among poets, he soon earned a reputation which lasted the rest of his life, gaining recognition from the likes of Hugh MacDiarmid, Maurice Lindsay, and Kenneth Rexroth, who included his work in their anthologies. At poetry readings in Scotland he appeared with Sorley Maclean, Norman MacCaig, and Hamish Henderson, who all shared literary interests that included traditional poetry, song, storytelling, and folklore. Maclean and MacCaig were both schoolteachers, Henderson a university lecturer, and Montgomerie also earned his living as a teacher.

Whether appearing in public or in a small, informal group, Montgomerie generally seemed very serious, though always approachable and insightful. Norah usually accompanied him and, whether seated in the audience or beside Bill in the company, she had a sunny disposition, smiled and laughed easily, and had bright, expressive eyes. Norah was a visual artist; she loved poetry and also wrote poems, but did not consider herself to be a poet. She loved traditional rhymes, songs, and stories, and expressed her appreciation of them in her hoppity-skippity drawings of children playing.

Norah’s background could scarcely have been more different from Bill’s austere upbringing. She was born in West Dulwich, London, on April 6th, 1909: the daughter of Letitia (Collins), a tailoress and John Shargool, an accountant. She described her family background as being Scottish, with Irish, Indian and some Italian influences, and she grew up in a musical household where the children were encouraged to enjoy music and the arts. In the introduction to her compilation of play rhymes for infants and young children (1966), Norah wrote, “Play rhymes [were] a tradition in my family. My own first recollection is sharing and playing them with my great-grandmother ...”¹⁷ As the First World War had started when Norah was of school age, her parents feared that London was in danger, so she was educated at a convent boarding school in Folkestone, Kent. On leaving school she worked in London as a freelance magazine illustrator to finance art school and prepare for a career as an artist.

In 1991, Norah (by then a family friend and also wellknown to the students in the University of Edinburgh class in Childlore)¹⁸ agreed to be recorded during the following conversation:¹⁹

From Childhood in London to a career in Dundee

Norah: I was the oldest of quite a large family, Catholic family, my great-grandmother lived with us until she died at the age of 95. [Her name was Clara Saunders Lewis] and she was very Scots, and I can remember going to my mother

and saying, “I can speak Scots – *Ah ken!*” [laughs] When I was very young, [my great-grandmother] used to take me for long walks. We lived in Herne Hill, in London, and went down to a large park, and I would push my doll’s pram, and she had her paper, and I had my paper, *The Rainbow*. And I would get out my paper, and she would say, “Norah, you know you can’t read!” And then she would come out with songs and so forth, and then she would think of nursery rhymes, you know. Although my great-grandmother hadn’t a very Scottish voice, because she lived in London, most of her life, the rhymes were from her own childhood, and she would sing them because I was interested.²⁰ Well, I always liked children ... and because I was interested in children, I tended to draw children more than adults – I really did love drawing children, and most of the freelance work I had done was for children’s books, and so forth.

MB: You mentioned you were quite young when you came to Scotland – what made you come?

NM: I saw an advert in the *Daily Mirror* for an artist with DC Thomson ... a publisher, and I knew they did children’s things, and I’d done some freelance work in London, so I took my portfolio to the office and got the job ... 1930, was it, in the studio of DC Thomson in Dundee. I arrived in Dundee and found that my address was, Mrs Scroggie, Blackness Avenue, Dundee, and the first thing I saw as I came out of the station was a tram with “Blackness” on it, so I thought, “Oh, well, [laughs], this doesn’t sound very promising”, you know. However, Mrs Scroggie was this very kindly, kind person, and I got a bedroom right at the very top of the house. Blackness Avenue runs from up the hills, practically to the top, and down the main road ... the houses were tenemented ... and there were a lot of students and young people there. [Until I moved to Dundee], the only pictures that I’d seen of Scotland were old paintings or photographs – black-and-white photographs, which were rather dreary, you know, and when I got out of the train was all this colour, you know, because you saw the hills, and the Blue Law Hill – there was a lot of colour everywhere!

MB: Reading your books about children’s rhymes, what struck me was how intently you must have listened ... not only to children playing and reciting rhymes, but also to their mothers, singing and talking to the children. When did you get interested in that?

NM: I got to know one or two elderly neighbours, and so forth, and I got them interested in rhymes, which they thought was just nonsense. Well, eventually I started writing them down ... in a notebook or bits of paper, but a notebook really, and I didn’t feel strange with Scots because of my great-grandmother. ... When I came to Dundee, the sound of people speaking seemed quite familiar, you know ... my great-grandmother, she would come out with songs and so forth, and then she would think of nursery rhymes you know.

Meeting Bill

MB: You now have a huge collection that both you and Bill have worked on and put into your books ... Did you meet Bill in Dundee?

NM: I did indeed, and it’s rather a strange story, because I had a boyfriend in London who was Austrian, and so one of the things I was determined to do was to learn German. And I found there was a German club in Dundee, and it was run by William Montgomerie ... So that’s how I got to know him, and then, in my digs I was with a German lady in Dundee, who had married a Scotsman, and so, curiously

enough, that was how I got to know Bill – it was because I was interested in German.

MB: Had Bill moved [from Glasgow] to Dundee to teach German?

NM: He wasn't teaching German at all – his subject is English, English literature. So, he was teaching English.

MB: You had many, many more other interests in common as well – song collecting, and everything else.

NM: Well, mainly I would say walking ... we lived in a very interesting part of Scotland, that not many people really bothered about. Dundee is on the edge, it's near fishing villages like Arbroath and Authmithie,²¹ and it's also only about 5 miles from a number of glens. ... Strathmore was just behind Dundee, and after Strathmore there were all these glens. We were both very keen on walking. I remember my first weekend living there, I walked from Dundee to Kirriemuir, [the distance there and back is 32 miles]. I wanted to do it because Kirriemuir is the birthplace of J. M. Barrie, who wrote *Peter Pan*, and of course I love *Peter Pan*.

MB: So, walking has been part of your lives all those years, not only in Scotland but far beyond – Bill showed me his walking stick with all the badges on it from places all over Europe, places that you've walked together.

NM: When he found I was interested in Germany we went to Germany together with the Scottish Youth Hostel Association ...

Collaborating and Collecting

Norah's notebooks benefited from Bill's input as he helped with dialect words, phrases, and other aspects of collecting. In 1934 Norah and Bill were married and made their home in Broughty Ferry, on the outskirts of the city. They had two children, Dian born in 1935 and Iain in 1940, who both became artists.

MB: How long were you collecting before you decided to publish a book?

NM: Well, I suppose about five years, you know, gradually (we gathered the collection). At first I just listened to them, and then I started to write them down, and I had a neighbour who was very good, and she corrected the spelling and so forth, and I also wrote down the tunes, because a lot of them had tunes, but the tunes have been dropped from the latest edition. ... I don't know why – publishers are not very keen on publishing music. ... Perhaps a cassette is the answer.²² That's much better than writing them down. ... I have made a sort of collection of singing games, with the tunes ...

MB: So this collection, was it before the war when you started?

NM: Oh yes, yes! It was from when I began living in Dundee [1930]. Well, when we had all this book gathered together [and approached publishers], and nobody was interested you know. So, I sent some of them to – you'll be amazed – Walter de la Mare.²³ And "Yes," he said. "Oh, these are lovely! They make my one little drop of Scottish blood dance!" So that was very kind of him, and he put me in touch with someone in Hogarth's Press ... in 1942, I think ... and it was Hogarth Press published it (in 1946).

Though frustrating and disappointing that no Scottish publisher would consider their manuscript, it may not be surprising that Hogarth Press picked up on Walter de La Mare's introduction of a fellow poet, for Hogarth Press was run by two poets, Leonard Woolf and John

Lehmann.²⁴ It was a stroke of ingenuity on Norah's part, and the publication not only encouraged the Montgomeries to continue, but the book also caught the attention of reviewers on both sides of the Atlantic.

Audio-recording the voices of tradition

Bill and Norah dedicated their first book to their two children, then aged eleven and five. Dian recalled her father's fieldwork which became a prominent feature of their family weekends and holidays:

“In the 1930s and 40s he pedalled around Angus, Perth and Fife on his bicycle, recording songs and lore on an old-fashioned wire machine, not graduating to the use of a car and a reel-to-reel tape recorder until the 1950s, when, along with Hamish Henderson, he worked with American folklorist Alan Lomax.”²⁵

NM: Bill recorded on a funny little machine called a Wirex ...

MB: What year would that have been?

NM: That would have been just before the war. ... I wasn't very interested or knowledgeable about the actual machine. ... How it worked, oh ... [thin steel wire was pulled across the recording head of the machine, pre-dating the use of acetate tape used in taperecorders.]

MB: And it was powered by battery, or electricity?

NM: Oh, battery. Nothing ran by electricity in those days. ... I mean, it was just so he could make the collection. ... It was far less organised than it is now [in established archives] ... There was no money at all ... that didn't come into it really – it was the feeling that Scotland had so many songs, not only songs, but stories that were so [worthwhile] – you know, people lived alone up in the hills ... they made their own entertainment. ...

MB: Bill told me he used to cycle – did you go with him [cycling] when he collected?

NM: No, I scarcely ever did, because by this time I had a small child, a small daughter, a baby – Dian. And that was followed by a small son, who was born just at the beginning of the war ... they kept me busy, but I was very interested ... but in no way could I go cycling – I did have a bike ... but a very ancient one; it was one that a friend had given me and that was almost tied together with bits of elastic and things like that, but it worked. [laughter] But it didn't work well enough to go on long trips with Bill.

MB: And did Bill used to take the Wirex on his bike?

NM: Yes, of course. It wasn't very large, if I remember rightly it was about this size: [Norah demonstrates with her hands c. 18 inches].

MB: Yes, and what about the newer kind of machinery ... the taperecorder – when did these recordings appear?

NM: Oh, well that was during the war, I think, when taperecorders appeared. [Norah takes Margaret to see Bill's collection] and then this one, this cumbersome – [she points to a large, reel-to-reel machine].

MB: That's a Ferrograph.

NM: Well, the Ferrograph seemed one of the best machines to get hold of.

MB: Yes. We've listened to the recordings, and they are remarkable. Is that the same machine that he's had since the 50s?

NM: Yes, it is.

MB: Surely, Bill, you didn't take that one on your bike? This machine is very large and heavy.

BM: No.

NM: No, darling, you didn't. We didn't have a car until, well, it must have been just after the war. So, I'm not quite sure how we, how you managed that –

MB: Bill, you went to Arbroath and recorded people there, and Auchmithie?

BM: Yes.

MB: And you recorded children in schools, too, didn't you Bill? [Bill acknowledges with a nod.]

NM: Well, yes that was in Hilltown school that you went to.

BM: Yes, Hilltown.

NM: It was called Hilltown. ... And I'm afraid that the headmaster wasn't very interested, he said, "Oh, I don't think, you know, that they do [sing] – well, perhaps they do sing these songs ..." But I mean so many people thought that nursery rhymes and these children songs were just a lot of nonsense.

Visiting a Playground in Dundee

In June 1952 Bill took his Ferrograph to Hilltown, Dundee, where he recorded nearly fifty items of "nonsense" sung by a group of children in a school playground. The tapes, now deposited in the School of Scottish Studies Archive, also record twenty two songs and ballads from elderly farmworkers in rural areas, and four ballads sung by fellow-poet Norman MacCaig.²⁶ The range of the collection represents the main areas of Montgomerie's interests, and though colleagues in education were dubious about the worth of studying childlore, his studies of traditional ballads and related manuscripts were of great interest to two professors of literature, language, and linguistics at the University of Edinburgh – in the mid-1940s, on the advice of Prof. A. McIntosh²⁷ and Prof. W. L. Renwick, Montgomerie began work on a PhD, and in 1952 had taken leave of his teaching job to write his thesis on Scottish ballad manuscripts.²⁸ He had made an intensive study of all the manuscripts consulted by Francis James Child, and noted the absence of versions written down from oral tradition and also ballad versions sung by children: "[Child] was too limited by his conception of traditional ballads as poems whose nature could most accurately be apprehended in manuscript form. ... But there are other things in the ballad MSS. ... They contain singing games and nursery rhymes."²⁹

And so, to the playground, where the first item Montgomerie recorded was a playground version of the ballad "The Cruel Mother" (Child 20), "Poor Lady Lido", sung by a fourteen year-old boy:

Poor Lady Lido³⁰

[SA1952/44/01 solo singer, Charles Allardyce]

There was a lady dressed in green
Poor Lady Lido
There was a lady dressed in green,
Down by the greenwood side-oh

She had [hud] a baby in her arms
Poor Lady Lido
She had [hud] a baby in her arms
Down by the greenwood side-oh

She had a breadknife sharp and lang,
Poor Lady Lido
She had a breadknife sharp and lang,
Down by the greenwood side-oh.

She stuck it in the baby's heart
Poor Lady Lido
She stuck it in the baby's heart
Down by the greenwood side-oh

Two loud knocks came at the door
Poor Lady Lido
Two loud knocks came at the door
Down by the greenwood side-oh

Two big p'licemen standing there,
Poor Lady Lido
Two big p'licemen standing there,
Down by the greenwood side-oh

He asked her what she'd done with the child,
Poor Lady Lido
He asked her what she'd done with the child,
Down by the greenwood side-oh

Said she'd killed her only child
Poor Lady Lido
Said she'd killed her only child
Down by the greenwood side-oh

He took her to the jail and hung her on a nail
Poor Lady Lido
He took her to the jail and hung her on a nail
Down by the greenwood side-oh

So that is the end of the lady in green
Poor Lady Lido
That is the end of the lady in green
Down by the greenwood side-oh

Wm Montgomerie: Well, now, where did you hear that?
Charles Allardyce: In Bridge of Weir Orphanage
Wm Montgomerie: And who was singing it?
Charles Allardyce: The boys in the orphanage
Wm Montgomerie: Thank you very much.

Examples of the items included in this article appear with the accession numbers allocated by the School of Scottish Studies Archive. Out of forty eight items, nine have been selected to reflect the local dialect, pronunciation, usage, and a few local traditions of the community. Though I have transcribed the entire corpus, it is not included here as readers may access most items online. As weblink will allow readers to listen to the recorded voice, there is, therefore, no transcription of melodies.³¹ Less common Scots words have been glossed within the texts, but dialect and grammatical constructions appear as transcribed from the recordings.

An overall impression is that most of the singers and players are girls (especially for skipping games), with many of the texts relating to choosing partners, courtship, and marriage. As I have not been able to locate accompanying notes, I have relied on the audio-recording which picks up skipping, jumping, ball-bouncing (or “stottin” as it is called), and sounds of “advance and retreat” (suggested by the noise of feet as well as the “advance and retreat” of the levels of sound of the voices).

Lay the cushion doon?³²

[SA1952/44/06: Singing game with actions]

Wheat straa’s dirty, [wheat straw]
Dirties aa yer shiftie [cotton or linen shirt-like garment]
Hey bonnie laddie will ye lay the cushion doon?
Will ye lay the cushion doon?
Will ye lay the cushion doon?
Hey bonnie laddie will ye lay the cushion doon?
[second voice sings “Will ye lay the cushion doon?”
Pause; Sound of laughter, shuffling]

The game evokes laughter during the pause and “action”, suggesting that it is a kissing game. There is shuffling, giggling as they choose the next player to be the central figure, and the song begins again.

The Banks o Aberfeldy³³

[SA1952/44/07 Singing game, skipping round]

My father wore a rippit coat [torn coat]
A rippit coat, a rippit coat
My father wore a rippit coat
Guess who tore it?

Ye needna hide alow the bed,
Alow the bed, alow the bed
Ye needna hide alow the bed,
Ye dirty little toe-rag

Father, mother may we go,
May we go, may we go?

Father, mother may we go,
To the Banks o Aberfeldy?

Yes, indeed you may go,
You may go, you may go
Yes, indeed you may go,
To the Banks o Aberfeldy.

Hop and skip and on you go,
On you go, on you go,
Hop and skip and on you go.
To the Banks o Aberfeldy.

Hop and skip and back you come
Back you come, back you come
Hop and skip and back you come
Fae the Banks o Aberfeldy.

You dinna ken what we saw
We saw, we saw
You dinna ken what we saw
On the Banks o Aberfeldy.

We saw a lad that danced in his kilt
Danced in his kilt, danced in his kilt
We saw a lad that danced in his kilt
On the Banks o Aberfeldy.

You dinna ken what we got,
We got, we got
You dinna ken what we got
On the Banks o Aberfeldy.

We got a kiss and a golden ring,
A golden ring, a golden ring,
We got a kiss and a golden ring,
On the Banks o Aberfeldy.

Apart from the opening quatrain, sung as a slow chant, the rest of the song is to the tune of “Will Ye Go to Sherrifmuir?”³⁴ (widely known as the tune of “London Bridge is Falling Down”). The first eight lines seem to have nothing to do with Aberfeldy, and there may be no obvious connection between that rural Perthshire market-town to the city of Dundee. The Birks o’ Aberfeldy, a wooded area famous for its beauty, is also wellknown through the song of that name composed by Robert Burns. There is no such place as The Banks o Aberfeldy – the settlement is situated to the south of the River Tay and there is no river named Aberfeldy. The town is, however, home to one of the oldest kilted regiments in the British Army, The Black Watch, and for more than a century Dundee and surrounding districts of Angus and Fife have been the main recruiting areas of the regiment. The “lad wha danced in his kilt” may represent

that connection, as there have been thousands of Dundonians who enlisted in the kilted regiment, “proud to wear the red hackle like wir faithers an granfaithers.”³⁵

Meh lad’s a Terrie³⁶

[SA1952.044.047 Song for a skipping and dancing game]

Meh lad’s a Terrie, meh lad’s a toff
Meh lad can wear a hat,
Meh lad can dance like that, [actions]
Meh lad’s a Terrie toff.

He sez he loves me, I know he does,
He sez he loves me, I know he does,
He sez he loves me, I know he does,
Meh lad’s a Terrie toff.

There may be no word in the conversation of Dundonians that will identify their place of origin as quickly as “meh”—my. The same vowel sound is echoed in other words, such as *pie* (peh), and can be heard in this and other songs sung by the children in Hilltown. A “Terrie” is the local abbreviated term for a member of the Territorial Army, which has a huge presence in Dundee. Less than two miles from Hilltown is the Dundee Territorial Army Centre, comprising extensive grounds and barracks. It is a recruiting station and training centre for several regiments, including Scotland’s oldest medical unit, The Medical Support Regiment.

The bumbee stung me³⁷

[SA1952.44.10 Skipping song for group]

The bumbee stung me, canna tell a lee, [bumble-bee; can’t tell a lie]
Oh the bumbee stung me, canna tell a lee
Oh the bumbee stung me, canna tell a lee,
For meh wee lassie’s haen twa-three. [had two or three]

Two girls “caw” the rope while the others stand single file in a queue. One girl jumps in, while all sing the song. It is repeated faster and faster, till the player trips, laughter ensues, then the next person jumps in.

Down in the meadow where the green grass grows³⁸

[SA1952.044.047 Skipping song]

Down in the meadow where the green grass grows
That’s where Ruth hangs out her clothes.
She sang and she sang and she sang so sweet,
Till she met her boyfriend coming down the street.
Sweetheart, sweetheart, will you marry me?
Call for the wedding at half past three.
Mummy makes Daddy call for the tea,

All for the wedding at half past three [pause, action]
Daddy makes the dumpling, Mummy makes the tea
All for the wedding at half past three [pause, action]
Iced cakes, iced cakes all for tea,
All for the wedding at half past three.

While there may be no dialect or local usages in this song, it is included here as it is a variant of one of the most commonly heard game-songs. As Ewan McVicar notes: “ ‘Down in yonder Meadow’ is a fine example of the collector's dictum that even if you recognise several opening lines you should never say ‘I already know that one.’”³⁹ The song has countless variations around the world, and some date back centuries.⁴⁰ This one reflects a time when weddings were celebrated in local church or co-operative halls, and all the catering was done by the family. Lavish wedding cakes are relatively recent, while a “clottie dumpling” could be made at home, usually for a special occasion or celebration. And it’s a “wellknown fact” all over Scotland that everybody’s Mummy (or Daddy) makes the best dumpling.

Knives and shepherds come away⁴¹

[SA1952.45.15 Skipping song]

Knives and shepherds come away, come away
Knives and shepherds come away, come away [repeated]

To the tune of Henry Purcell’s “Nymphs and Shepherds”, the children only sing the first two lines, which are repeated as they play. It is impossible to know if any of them were aware that their song is a parody.

I’m the Monster of Blackness⁴²

[SA1952.044.047 Ball-bouncing song, sung while each child bounces a ball]

I’m the monster of Blackness,
My age you’ll never guess.
I can twirl in a ring, I can do the Highland Fling.
I’m the monster of Blackness.

I’m the monster of Blackness,
I bought a wedding dress,
I put it in a coffin, and it fell through the bottom.
I’m the monster of Blackness.

Not to be outdone by Highlanders who boast a world famous monster, Nessie, the Hilltown children sing of their own monster, located in the area of Dundee known as Blackness. The recording picks up the accuracy of their ball-bouncing as they never miss a beat as they “stot the ba”. In the last line, a few children can be heard singing “Loch Ness”.

glass case, on Sunday afternoon, is a poor thing compared with the white ptarmigan snoring over the grey lichened rocks in the Cairngorms, heard only by the mountaineer.

We hope to see your corbies and laverocks as welcome in the British Nursery as English Mother Goose and the four and twenty blackbirds. You will migrate, and dance in the minds and feet of children who have never seen Scotland, but will know of the country through you. You may travel across the Atlantic to America, or down under to Australia and New Zealand, where there are folk who once knew you and will welcome you. You are ambassadors.

Children who know you will grow up to love Scottish ballads and songs, and then William Dunbar and Robert Henryson will not seem strange. Robert Burns, William Souter's *Seeds in the Wind*,⁴⁷ and Hugh McDiarmid's *Sangshaw*⁴⁸ will seem familiar country.

Norah and William Montgomerie

The corbies and laverocks had already travelled the Atlantic and beyond, and so did Norah and William's books, thanks to publishers in New York, Toronto, and Sydney. Norah and William's work provided comparative texts and tunes for overseas scholars, particularly eminent American folklorists such as Herbert Halpert and Archer Taylor⁴⁹ as well as ballad specialists Bernard H. Bronson,⁵⁰ James Porter, Herschel Gower,⁵¹ and William B. McCarthy.⁵² The "critters" too were familiar to folk overseas who sensed a kinship, having "met them" – or ones very like them – in their own region.

As can be seen in the References below, the Montgomerie published many books, mostly together, but also individually, and Bill's output was also in demand for scholarly journals and poetry collections (not cited here). Those listed below were written for children and their parents or adult companions, and covered a much wider range of tradition than represented on the Hillstreet recording. Their children's books included counting-out rhymes, riddles, tongue-twisters, finger-play and other "baby-lore", weatherlore, place-lore, and folktales and legends. Additional information, usually on the dust jacket or back cover, reminded adult readers of the benefit of sharing the rhymes with their children, such as this note, published in 1990: "The transition from these rhymes, many of which are the words of folk songs, to adult folksongs of the folk clubs, and from them to the classic ballads, is a natural progression."⁵³

Having gained the confidence of publishing companies, however, it seemed that bending an ear at the Scottish Education Department was out of the question, not only for the Montgomerie but also an ever-widening "circle" dismayed at the language policy followed in Scottish schools – for example, under the heading of "War poetry", pupils would study Wilfred



Bill and Norah, Edinburgh, 1980s
© Dian Montgomerie Elvin Collection

Owen and Rupert Brooke – undoubtedly fine poets – yet there would be no poems in Scots, such as “Epitaph” by William Montgomerie⁵⁴ or any by his fellow-folklorist, Hamish Henderson, whose war poems, *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica*, were awarded the prestigious Somerset Maugham prize for poetry in 1947. It may have been celebrated in Cambridge by the likes of E. P. Thompson but did not impress the Scottish Education Department, as the next generation, the “baby boomers” would be schooled under the same guidelines. Like Montgomerie and Henderson, however, many would hold to the “mither tongue”, among them writer and language activist Billy Kay (b. 1951),⁵⁵ the co-founder of *Chapman*, poet Walter Perrie (b. 1949), and subsequent editor, writer, and literary critic Joy Hendry (b. 1953).

Poets and writers of all generations enjoyed a vibrant literary scene in Edinburgh, which suited the Montgomeries in their retirement. From 1977 to 1984 William Montgomerie was editor of the poetry magazine *Lines Review*,⁵⁶ and, with Norah, continued to work on literary and folklore projects until health began to decline. When Bill died in 1994 and Norah in 1998, they left a treasure-trove of manuscripts, with several “works in progress” including Norah’s retelling of the legends of the Celtic hero, Finn MacCoul, whose exploits link Ireland and Scotland. It would be pleasing to Norah and Bill that the manuscript was edited by their grandson, Julian Brooks, and her proposed book, *The Fantastical Feats of Finn MacCoul*, was published in Edinburgh in 2009.

The Montgomeries’ devotion to folklore and language never faltered, and neither did their hopes for recognition of “the mither tongue”. Almost seventy years after the publication of *Scottish Nursery Rhymes*, the Scottish government department “Education Scotland” (replacing the former Scottish Education Department), launched their Scots Language Policy in 2015, to “recognise the important role that school education has in promoting the use of Scots.” The curriculum underwent many stages of development and now aims to “promote the acquisition, use and development of Scots in education, media, publishing and the arts.”⁵⁷

The material gathered by the Montgomeries over many decades is as relevant today as it was when they first collected it. Educators and folklorists would be greatly rewarded by including it in their resources and research, and children in the classroom would enjoy the richness of the language, discover the fun of learning, and develop greater confidence in their own culture.

Notes

1. The recording, with a transcription by Julia C. Bishop, is held in the Archives of Cultural Tradition at the University of Sheffield, audiotape A19-98, Special Collections. (<http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/library/special>).
2. Robert Baron notes that between 1938 and 1939, in New York City, “a group of FWP workers supervised by folklorist Herbert Halpert, [were] instructed to ‘look for children’s rhymes, making specific note of the nationality of the reciter, the place of collection, and any comments made by the children.’ ... In all, about 1000 items of children’s folklore were collected ...” Robert Baron, “‘I Saw Mrs Saray, Sitting on a Bombalerry’: Ralph Ellison Collects Children’s Folklore”, *Children’s Folklore Review*, Vol. 32 (2010), 23-52. Halpert himself did further collecting both in New York and further afield. He later produced a book proposal, but the work was never published, except in a few short articles.

3. Thanks to the Indiana University, Bloomington, the recordings housed in their Archives of Traditional Music have been digitised, and the Halpert Mid-Atlantic Collection can be heard online via <https://libraries.indiana.edu/halpert-midatlantic>. The recordings were part of a Work Projects Administration (WPA) project, set up by the Federal Government to alleviate mass unemployment during the Depression. Folklorists employed include Herbert Halpert, Benjamin Botkin, and Alan Lomax. Though Halpert's fieldwork collections range across all genres of Folklore, childlore was the subject of his MA thesis ("Folk Rhymes of New York City Children", MA Thesis, Department of Anthropology, Columbia University, 1946).
4. Halpert's classification guide for the Folklore Archive at the Memorial University of Newfoundland, adapted by his wife Letty from a version he made in 1948, is published as Appendix B, p. 389 ff of M. J. Lovelace, P. Smith, and J. D. A. Widdowson, eds, *Folklore: An Emerging Discipline, Selected Essays of Herbert Halpert*, St. John's, Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Publications, 2002.
5. Halpert also introduced me to the slightly later work of James Ritchie, who produced a film of Edinburgh children, "The Singing Street" (1951). The accompanying sixteen-page booklet is cited in his article as: *The Singing Street. A Merry-Ma-Tanzie of Skipping, Hiding, Hopping, Birling, Stotting, Playing and Dancing Rhymes*, 1951, revised edn, Edinburgh, The Albyn Press, 1954, with a note that the collection was "taken down from word of mouth for use in making a film." See Herbert Halpert, "Childlore Bibliography: A Supplement", *Western Folklore*, Vol 41, No. 3 (1982), 205-228, 217, accessed February 6th, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/1499661. The supplement followed an earlier article by Sylvia Ann Grider, "A Select Bibliography of Childlore", *Western Folklore*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (1980), 248-265. www.jstor.org/stable/1499805, accessed February 6th, 2020.
6. *Traditional Scottish Nursery Rhymes*, 1990, p. 3.
7. Publishers in the USA, Canada, and Australia produced their books; a fuller bibliography of their work appears in the References below.
8. Alan Lomax, who first visited Scotland in 1951, noted that William Montgomerie was one of four collector-folklorists who assisted him during his monumental recording project for the Columbia World Library of Folk and Primitive Music. The LP sleeve notes: "Edited by Alan Lomax, with the MacLeans of Raasay, Hamish Henderson and William Montgomerie."
9. For over a century, all Scottish schoolteachers were trained to adhere to the English language policy of the Scottish Education Act of 1872, which was based on the Elementary Education Act of 1870 (England and Wales) to provide compulsory education in the English language for children aged five to thirteen. In Wales, as in Gaelic Scotland, the Act had a particularly negative effect on the health of the Welsh language. According to a research article, "WELSH: The Welsh language in education in the UK": "[T]his act is widely believed to be one of the most damaging pieces of legislation in the social history of the Welsh language, as hundreds of thousands of children in Wales who very often knew no English were taught in English only. Tactics which would today be known as emotional and physical abuse were used in order to ensure that children did not use their first and very often only language."
https://www.mercator-research.eu/fileadmin/mercator/documents/regional_dossiers/welsh_in_the_uk_2nd.pdf
10. Francis Collinson, "Reviewed Works: 'The Twa Corbies', 'Sir Walter Scott as Ballad Editor', 'William Motherwell and Robert A. Smith'. Three articles by William Montgomerie in *The Review of English Studies*, July 1955, April 1956, and May 1958. 'Some Notes on the Herd Manuscripts', by William Montgomerie in *Edinburgh Bibliographical Society Transactions*, Vol. III, Part 4", *Journal of the English Folk Dance*

- and Song Society*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (1958), 170. www.jstor.org/stable/4521565, accessed March 11th, 2020.
11. J. B. Pick, obituary for William Montgomerie in *The Scotsman*, November 8th, 1994.
 12. William Montgomerie features among the “greats” of the twentieth century. The Scottish Poetry Library catalogue cites several hundred contributions by him, with reviews, articles, and books as well as individual poems. See <https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/>
 13. The tapes are in the Archives of the School of Scottish Studies, accession numbers SA1952/44 and SA119/102.
 14. The Scottish Poetry, biography by Dian Montgomerie Elvin and painting by Norah Montgomerie, see <https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poet/william-montgomerie/>
 15. Two of Montgomerie’s poems, “Ma Faither” and “Breaking of Bread” reflect the influence of his hardworking, fun-loving, deeply religious and Scots-speaking father. See William Montgomerie, *From Time to Time: Selected Poems*, Edinburgh, Canongate, 1985, pp. 5-13.
 16. Several of his poems had already been published in literary magazines and journals including *John O’London’s Weekly*, *The Adelphi*, *The Scots Magazine*, and *The Scottish Educational Journal*.
 17. Norah Montgomerie, comp., *This Little Pig Went to Market: Play Rhymes for Infants and Young Children*, London, Sydney, Toronto, The Bodley Head, 1966, new edn, 1983, p. 11.
 18. From the mid-1980s to mid-1990s, the University of Edinburgh offered a course in Childlore as part of the newly established degree in Scottish Ethnology. Part of my remit, collaborating with Dr Alan Bruford (1937-1995), was to plan the course and teach it. Norah was especially interested to attend, as she was keen to discover what young folk sang, played, and remembered from the school playgrounds of the 1970s to 1990s. Dr Bruford dealt with the Gaelic lore and I taught Scots tradition as well as methodology. Students valued the opportunity to get to know the Montgomerie’s, recognising the importance of their work to the wider scholarship of Folklore. The classes included Leila Dudley Edwards and Elizabeth Carnegie, who both followed careers in Folklore. The course is no longer part of the degree.
 19. The original plan was to record both Norah and Bill, but sadly that was not to be, as he was suddenly admitted to hospital, seriously ill. When he returned home, alas he was not able to take part, though he was totally engaged as an observer, while Norah told their story. The taperecording can be accessed at the School of Scottish Studies Archive, SA1991.102, with thanks to Leila Dudley Edwards who transcribed the original.
 20. Similarly, folklorist Annie Geddes Gilchrist (1863-1954), born and brought up in Lancashire, attributed her interest to the fact that she was “a full blooded Scot on both sides of her family.” Lyn A. Wolz, “Resources in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library: The Anne Geddes Gilchrist Manuscript Collection”, *Folk Music Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 5 (2005), 619-639. www.jstor.org/stable/4522748, accessed February 27th, 2020. The Montgomerie’s corresponded with Annie Geddes Gilchrist, who wrote eleven letters to William Montgomerie between 1948 and 1952. See the manuscript collection of the National Library of Scotland: <http://manuscripts.nls.uk/repositories/2/resources/10370>
 21. North of Dundee, Arbroath is sixteen miles away and Authmithie a further four miles.
 22. The Montgomerie’s were both recorded for Whigmaleerie audio books for children (see References below).
 23. Walter de la Mare (1873-1956), best remembered for his stories for children and poems such as “The Listeners”, which is a long-time favourite.
 24. Hogarth Press was founded in 1917 by Leonard and Virginia Woolf and in 1938 she relinquished her interest in the business, which was then run in partnership with John Lehmann.

25. The Scottish Poetry biography is by Dian Montgomerie Elvin. See <https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poet/william-montgomerie/>
26. The taperecording accession numbers range between SA 1952.044 and SA 1952.054. Most can be accessed on Tobar an Dualchais/Kist of Riches. See <http://tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/advancedsearch?page=8>
27. Professor Angus McIntosh was the prime mover in the founding of the School of Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh, 1951.
28. Dian notes that “Dundee Education Authority disapproved of his spending a year, on a very small grant, writing up his doctoral thesis, and demoted him.” See note 25 (Scottish Poetry Library, above.)
29. William Montgomerie, “Bibliography of the Scottish Ballad Manuscripts, 1730-1825”, unpublished PhD dissertation, The University of Edinburgh, 1953, Preface, pp. xxi–xxii.
30. The song is the first track on the first tape of the series, SA1952.04.01, and a typed transcription is the first item in the archive log book, under the title of “Cruel Mother” (Child 20), 1952/44/1. The recording has not been included in the Tobar an Dualchais/Kist o Riches website.
31. While some of the items had been transcribed for the archive, and also for the on-line website “Tobar an Dualchais/Kist o Riches”, for this article I have revised as many of the inaccuracies as I could.
32. Listen on <http://tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/72307>
33. Listen on <http://tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/72309>
34. A version of a song of this name, composed after the Battle of Sherrifmuir in 1715, was collected by James Hogg, and published in his *Jacobite Relics of Scotland*, 1819. He notes that the “air has long been popular” (pp. 149-150). Another version of the song appears in *Collection of Scottish Songs* by Robert Chambers (1829), with the title “We’ll awa’ to Sheriffmuir, to haud the Whiggs in Order” (Vol. ii, p. 551).
35. The red hackle is a bright scarlet feather plume, which is worn on the soldiers’ bonnets. Among the kilted regiments it is the most distinctive feature of the Black Watch uniform, adopted in 1795 and worn with pride all over the world.
36. Listen on <http://tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/72311>
37. Listen on <http://tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/72315>
38. Listen on <http://tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/72332>
39. Ewan McVicar, *Scots Children’s Songs and Rhymes: Doh, Ray, Me, When Ah Wis Wee*, Edinburgh, Birlinn, 2007, pp. 192-193.
40. For example, Alice Bertha Gomme included several old versions in *The Traditional Games of England, Scotland and Ireland*, Vol. 1 (1894) p. 99 and Volume 2 (1898) p. 323. In 1939 Herbert Halpert recorded a group of girls in North Carolina singing “Down in the meadow where the green grass grows”, accessed via “Halpert Mid-Atlantic Collection” at <https://libraries.indiana.edu/halpert-midatlantic>. The Opies (1985, pp. 127-130) also have several versions.
41. Listen on <http://tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/72345>. The track is misnamed “Nymphs and Shepherds” and the transcription also uses “nymphs”.
42. Listen on <http://tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/72352>
43. Listen on <http://tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/72372>
44. *Chapman 23-24: Scots Language and Literature double issue*, ed. Joy Hendry, Vol. 5, Nos. 5-6 (1979), 76.
45. These appear in *Scottish Nursery Rhymes* (1946) and *Sandy Candy and other Scottish Nursery Rhymes* (1948).
46. Within the Scottish Education Department, little had changed half a century later when David Purves wrote: “At school, a policy of cultural repression became the norm and

generations of children were presented with an image of ‘correct’ or ‘good’ English, but little or no attempt was made to present an image of good Scots. Commonly, the natural speech of Scots children was simply represented as a deviation from good English.” David Purves, *Scots Grammar: Scots Grammar and Usage*, Edinburgh, The Saltire Society, 1997, revised edn, 2002, p. 2.

47. Dian Montgomerie recalls going to Perth with her parents to visit her father’s friend and fellow-poet, William Soutar (1898-1943). At a young age she was familiar with his book, *Seeds in the Wind. Poems in Scots for Children*, first published in 1933 (Edinburgh, Grant and Murray), and in 2014, Dian produced an online translation of all the poems in the book. See <https://williamsoutar.com/Seeds%20in%20the%20Wind%20v1.pdf>
48. MacDiarmid’s collection of poems, *Sangshaw*, has, for example, “The Bonnie Broukit Bairn” (The beautiful neglected child) which ends with the oft-quoted phrase, “the hail clanjamfrie” (the whole lot, all of them).
A recitation of it can be heard on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hov8wXCKnk>
Montgomerie’s letters from MacDiarmid, dating from 1932, are in the collections of the National Library of Scotland; see <http://manuscripts.nls.uk/repositories/2/resources/11579>
49. In his review of *Scottish Nursery Rhymes*, Taylor noted (1949) that the book “is now in its third impression and fully deserves this success ... it makes valuable additions to our stock of traditional rhymes and should stimulate study of them.” See Archer Taylor, *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 62, No. 244 (1949), 214. www.jstor.org/stable/536333 accessed March 11th, 2020.
50. *The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads, Volume 1*, Princeton University Press, 1959 (see Acknowledgements).
51. *Jeannie Robertson: Emergent Singer, Transformative Voice*, Knoxville, Tennessee, University of Tennessee Press, 1995, pp. 115-127.
52. *The Ballad Matrix: Personality, Milieu, and the Oral Tradition*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 52.
53. See W. and N. Montgomerie, *Chambers Book of Scottish Nursery Rhymes*, p. 2.
54. *From Time to Time: selected poems*, Edinburgh: Canongate, 1985, p. 82.
55. Billy Kay’s book, *Scots: The Mither Tongue* (Edinburgh, Mainstream, 1986) became a best-seller and his work has been the basis for several radio and television programmes. See <http://www.billykay.co.uk/Pages/OdysseyProductions2.asp>
56. *Lines Review* was a Scottish poetry journal, founded in 1952 by Edinburgh publisher Callum Macdonald. The last edition, edited by poet Tessa Ransford, was published in 1998.
57. See <https://education.gov.scot/education-scotland/news-and-events/keeping-the-mither-tongue-alive-celebrating-minority-languages-in-all-their-diversity-and-distinctiveness/>

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Royal Conservatoire of Scotland