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Song: "Sir Neil and Glengyle"

Singer: Stanley Finnemore

Town: Bridgewater, ME

NA0361 T0248

Collector: Mrs. Doris Stackpole

Date: Spring 1962

Laws: M39

Roud: 1914

This broadside ballad is of Scottish origin. It was first printed in Peter Buchan's *Ancient Ballads of the North of Scotland* in 1828. Gavin Greig, in *Folk-Song of the North-East*, wrote that it seemed to be an 18th century ballad. It was probably written by a minor poet attempting to bring an older ballad up to date. There is evidence that this older ballad was "The Braes of Yarrow" (Child 214). The two ballads have the same meter, a similar theme, and both deal with conflict between a brother and his sisters' sweetheart. In "Sir Neil and Glengyle," the brother feels the need to avenge a slander on his sister, the "favours" of which Neil "boast[s] proudly" in the second verse. In some versions of "The Braes of Yarrow," the brother kills his sister's lover because he feels the young man is not worthy of her. Interestingly, although most versions of "Sir Neil and Glengyle" involve the death of the brother, one version, collected from Mrs. Annie V. Marston in West Gouldsboro, Maine, has the brother killing Sir Neil, which brings it closer to the plot of "The Braes of Yarrow." Mrs. Marston's tune, as well as one collected in Nova Scotia by Roy W. MacKenzie, is used for versions of "The Braes of Yarrow," both in Scotland and Maine.

Glengyle was probably a member of the MacGregor clan. MacGregor of Glengyle was a branch of that family from Deeside, in Aberdeenshire. The identity of Sir Neil is less certain. James Hogg published a version of this ballad in *Scottish Pastorals* entitled "The Death of Sir Niel Stuart and Donald McVane, esq." However, Peter Buchan thought that "Sir Neil" may have been not a Stuart, but Niel Campbell, a follower of William Wallace in the 14th century. It is interesting to note that, in some versions, Buchan's included, the "rock isle" in the first line is rendered as "Argyle," an area traditionally ruled by the Campbell clan. The actual place name may have been dropped when the ballad came to North America.

Roy W. MacKenzie writes in *The Quest of the Ballad* of the feelings of one of his informants, Bob Langille, about this ballad saying, "The tragic tale of misunderstanding, treachery, and murder was to him a true report of human relationships in which, by virtue of his function as relater, he was constrained to bear a vicarious part" (MacKenzie 239). Clearly these themes of misunderstanding and treachery resonate, or have resonated, with people far removed in time and space from the composition of the ballad itself.

Lyrics:

1.

On yon dark isle, beyond rock isle,
Where flocks and herds were plenty;
There lived a squire and his sister Anne,
Was the pride of all that countree.
'Twas young Glengyle who courted her,
Intending for to marry;
But a Highland lad she did prefer,
He was handsome, brisk and merry.

2.

When tidings came to young Advan
How Neil had boasted proudly
Of favors gained by Lady Anne,
Which made him swear thus rudely:
“By all the friends that I possess,
If I live to see the morning,
This youth or I shall breath our last,
I'll stand no more such scorning.”

3.

On yon seashore where the proud waves roar,
He challenged Neil to fight him;
These two men met before the sun,
Not a living creature nigh them.
“What's ill, what's ill, my friend?” Neil cried,
“That you should want to destroy me?”
“I will not flattered be, Sir Neil,
Unsheath your sword and fight me.”

4.

“Sheath up your sword Advan,” Neil said,
“Don't you resume to fight me,
For well you know in Scotland there's none,
That can wave the broadsword like me.”
“I know your boasting courage, Neil,
But why should you despise me?
And if you do refuse to fight,
Like a dog I will chastise thee.”

5.

It was many the savage and deadly thrust,
This generous man he warded.
For to take the life of such a dear a friend
Himself he only guarded;
But being vexed and sore abused,
His angry passion started,
And through the heart of young Advan
His sword he quickly darted.

6.

“Curse on my skill, what have I done?
Rash man that thou would have this!
For to take the life of such a dear friend
When I would have spilled blood to save it!
To some far isle I will exile,
To fly I know not whither.
How can I face my lady Anne,
Since I have slain her brother?”

7.

Then turning himself thus round about
To see if there was anyone nigh him,
And who should he see but young Glengyle,
Like a bird thus he came flying.
“I come, I come to stop the strife,
But since you've been victorious;
I will have revenge or lose my life;
My honor bids me do this.”

8.

“Sheath up your sword, Glengyle,” Neil says.
“Where is this quarrel grounded?
Three times I could have pierced your dauntless breast,
Three times I've had you wounded.”
Then saying this he quit his guard
And young Glengyle advanced,
And through the heart of brave Sir Neil
The sword behind him glanced.

9.

Then falling down Neil cried, “I'm slain!”
Adieu to all things earthly.
Adieu Glengyle, you have won the day,
But you have won it basely.”
When tidings came to Lady Anne,
Time after time she fainted;
She ran and kissed their clay cold lips
And o'er their fate lamented.

10.

“Oh brave Sir Neil why was you slain?
Why was you so abused?
For a braver man never faced a foe,
Had he been fairly used.
Now for your sake a maid I'll live,
Glengyle shall ne'er oppose me;
And for your sake for seven long years
The dewy black shall cloth me.”

Sources:

Christie, William. *Traditional Ballad Airs*. Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1876, 82+; Greig, Gavin. *Folk-song in Buchan and Folk-song of the North-east CIX*. Hatboro, PA: Folklore Associates, 1963, 1; Hogg, James. “The Death of Sir Niel Stuart and Donald McVane, esq.” *Scottish Pastorals, Poems, Songs, etc. Mostly Written in the Dialect of the South*. Edinburgh: John Taylor, Grassmarket, 1801, 49-55; Ives, Edward D. “Sir Neil and Glengyle.” *Northeast Folklore VII*. 1966; Laws, G. Malcolm. *American Balladry from British Broad-sides*. Philadelphia: The American Folklore Society, 1957, 200; MacKenzie, W Roy. *Ballads and Sea Songs from Nova Scotia*. Cambridge,

MA: Harvard University Press, 1928, 76-9; and MacKenzie, W Roy. *The Quest of the Ballad*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1919, 239.