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Queen Among the Heather: The Life of Belle Stewart

Sheila Stewart. Birlinn. ISBN 9781841585284. £7.99

Queen Among the Heather is, on one level, an affectionate biography of the legendary matriarch of the Stewarts of Blair, by her immensely talented daughter. It is also a study of the travelling people of Scotland and, to a lesser extent, Ireland, focused on the Stewart family. Framed within Belle Stewart's lifetime (1906–97), this is an account of a life spent within a rich cultural environment, and amongst prodigiously talented people.

Born Belle MacGregor in a bow tent at Caputh, near Blairgowrie, Belle Stewart learnt her first song, 'The Twa Brothers', aged six. She married Alex Stewart and lived and worked in Scotland and Ireland. She performed widely in Scotland, England, Europe and North America with her musical family, including her husband, daughters Cathie and Sheila and, latterly, Sheila's children. Belle is presented as extremely hard working, optimistic in the face of adversity, generous of spirit and proud of her heritage. Possessed of a terrific sense of fun, she could administer a firm put-down. Performing at Sidmouth, for instance, the Stewarts met some new-age travellers: 'My mother... said to them... "Have you ever seen other travellers with matted hair, like yours, and no washin themselves?" "Well no," he said..., "maybe we will start a trend among your travellers"... "Not on your nelly," my mother replied.'

Stewart depicts the lifestyle and worldview of travellers in all their complexity. There is a great deal of information about traveller experiences, from berry picking to pearl fishing to hawking. This was, and is, a culture of great tenderness, nurturing creativity and valuing traditions, with a vibrant linguistic range including Cant and Scots. However, this is no whitewash; Stewart is honest about the deeply rooted prejudices travellers face; equally, she shows traveller society as – like the wider Scottish society that surrounds it – subject to problems, from alcohol abuse to domestic violence.

Stewart is revealing, too, on the nature of folk revival. While she is appreciative of the opportunities this gave the Stewarts and performers like Jeannie Robertson (Alex Stewart's cousin), she is alert to its inequalities: 'we never got one penny for singing our hearts out, not even from Hamish [Henderson]. Lots of them [collectors] thought we were only travelling people, and that they could do what they liked with us for nothing.' She is illuminating on the Stewarts' performance practices, too: 'We all had our own songs and we weren't allowed to dip into

each other's. That's the way it was; my mother was the boss of what we could sing on stage.'

Perhaps unsurprisingly in a writer who is a wonderful interpreter of ballads, Stewart's own narrative is direct and understated, with emotion that is below the surface but no less expressive for that. Here, what the folklorist would itemise as *märchen* or legends, ballads or lyrics, become part of a continuous narrative. Recollections blend into anecdotes and are interspersed with tales, songs and music: supernatural tales like 'The Black Dog of the Stewarts' and 'The Headless Man'; Alex Stewart's pipe tune 'Iain Mhor' and Jim Reid's 'The Stewarts of Blair'. Pre-eminently, there are Belle Stewart's songs, including, of course, her famous composition 'The Berry Fields of Blair', along with tales, such as 'Aippley and Orangey'. The book also includes evocative photographs and moving tributes from family, friends and colleagues, many of whom are distinguished performers or scholars of song.

Queen Among the Heather should be set alongside other insider accounts of travellers' lives: Betsy Whyte's *The Yellow on the Broom* (1979) and *Red Rowans and Wild Honey* (1990), Duncan Williamson's *The Horsieman* (1994) and those within Timothy Neat's *The Summer Walkers* (1996). Equally, it should be read beside Ewan MacColl's study of the Stewarts, *Till Doomsday in the Afternoon* (1986), with a soundtrack of *The Stewarts of Blair* (1994), Belle Stewart's *The Queen Among the Heather* (1998), Sheila Stewart's *From the Heart of the Tradition* (2000), MacColl's radio ballad *The Travelling People* (1969) and Martyn Bennett's reworking of Sheila Stewart's performance of MacColl's 'Moving on Song' on *Grit* (2003). Taken together, these provide a convincing record of the significance of the Stewarts within traveller, and national, expressive culture.

Stewart is highly conscious of changes in travellers' lives over Belle's lifetime: 'not only is berry time over, but also the Dundee fortnight, and the Glasgow and Fife fairs as well. The worst part of all for us travellers is no more ceilidhs round the outside fire and no more... keeping up our culture.' Belle Stewart, however, her contribution to music recognised by a BEM, was not downhearted and, in that spirit, she should have the last word: 'Noo, I hae been to balls and I hae been to halls/I've been in London and Balquhidder/But the bonniest lass that ever I did see/She was herding yowes among the heather.'

Valentina Bold