

Folk & Traditional Song Lyrics

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The Muckin' O Geordies Byre

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At a relic aul'croft upon the hill,
Roon the neuk frae Sprottie's mill,
Tryin' a' his life tae jine the kill
Lived Geordie MacIntyre

He had a wife a swir's himsel'
An' a daughter as black's Auld Nick himsel',
There wis some fun-haud awa' the smell
At The muckin' o' Geordie's byre.

cho: For the graim was tint, the besom was deen,
The barra widna row its leen,
An' siccan a soss it never was seen
At the muckin' o' Geordie's byre

For the daughter had to strae and neep
The auld wife started to swipe the greep
When Geordie fell sklite on a rotten neep
At the muckin' o' Geordie's byre,

Ben the greep cam' Geordie's soo
She stood up ahint the coo
The coo kickit oot an' o whit a stew
At the muckin' o' Geordies byre.

For the aul' wife she was booin'doon
The soo was kickit on the croon
It shoved her heid in the wifie's goon
Then ben through Georide's byre.

The daughter cam thro the barn door
An' seein' her mother let ooot a roar,
To the midden she ran an' fel ower the boar
At the muckin' o' Geordie's byre,

For the boar he lap the midden dyke
An' ower the riggs wi' Geordie's tyke.
They baith ran intill a bumbee's byke
At the muckin' o' Geordie's byre,

O a hunder' years are passed an' mair
Whaur Sprottie's wis, the hill is bare;

The croft's awa' sae ye'll see nae mair
At the muckin' o' Geordie's byre

His folks a' deid an' awa' lang syne-
In case his memory we should tyne,
Whistle this tune tae keep ye in min'
At the muckin' o' Geordie's byre-

Notes: This excellent comic song has a long and rather complicated history. Steinhouse refers to a "humorous but vulgar ballad" of about 1700 about a young lady of rank who fell in love with one of her father's tenants and married him. This is presumably the song of which a fragment is preserved in Herd's collection (1769 vol. II p.201) The first verse goes:

The mucking of geordie's byre
And shoaling the grupe sae clean
Has gardme weit my cheek
And greet with baith my een

In August 1793 Robert Burns wrote to George Thomas. "Another favorite air of mine is: The Muckin'O'Geordie's Byre. When sung slow with expression, I have wished that it had better poetry-that I have endeavored to supply." The result was hardly one of his more felicitous efforts. There can be little doubt that the old "Vulgar ballad" contains better poetry than Burn's sentimental ditty.

Burns alas, was not the only poet to try his hand at "mucking" the byre James Tytler, the noted publicist and aeronaut did likewise, and likewise landed in the midden. His gormless version (Scots Musical Museum Vol. I No.96) has lines of ineffable bathos:

"I listen'd with pleasure to Jenny, While mournfully singing this
song..."

The 18th century history of The Muckin o Geordies Byre is in fact an early example of the sort of "improvement" and "purification"(ie pseudo-genteel revamping) which Paisley poets like Tannahill and Thomas Lyle were to specialise in, and it is sad to have to list Burns as one of the candidates for inclusion in "the stuffed owl"

Luckily the present century has seen a reaction against all this bilious mawkishness. The version Jimmy MacBeath sings here is now regarded up and down the North-East as "his" version. It's comparatively modern. It was made popular between the wars by the professional entertainer Willie Kemp who sang it up and down the country at "bothy night" concerts and recorded it on a Beltona 78 record. A slightly different version was put into currency by another popular "stage" bothy singer--George Morris of Old Meldrum (Both these performers laid claim to the title- at present held by Jimmy himself-of "King of the Cornkisters") Their version is probably

descendant of an earlier song maybe stemming from a relative of Herd's fragment.

The Kemp-MacBeath version belongs to the genre of comic extravaganzas about balls, fairs, weddi and characters to bursting point and sometimes beyond.

It remains to be added that the title and the tune of the Muckin o Geordie's Byre were a gift to Jacobite parodists in the 18th century and that in the year of Peterloo Alex. Rodger, one of the poets of the Radical War used both for a singing satire against the governments of Liverpool, Sidmouth and Castlereagh.

(From Scottish Tradition, I Bothy Ballads, Tangent Records, TNGM109/School of Scottish Studies) CB
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