

Tom McKean Podcast

Speaker 1 [00:00:03] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.

Speaker 2 [00:00:21] Hello, and a very warm welcome to the Culture in Everyday Life podcast produced by the Elphinstone Institute at the University of Aberdeen. The Elphinstone Institute is a center for the study of ethnology, folklore and ethnomusicology with a research and public engagement remit covering the North-East and north of Scotland. Through interaction with researchers and practitioners, this podcast explores cultural phenomena in everyday life.

Dr Thomas A McKean [00:00:46] *Sings song called Seven Lang Years*

[00:06:50] That's a song called Seven Long Years or many other things. It's taken us about eight and a half minutes to sing that and listen to it in this collective experience of ballad singing. And that's part of the aspect of time in ballads that I want to talk about - the actual time and space they take in a room, in a performance. Now, each of us has experienced something there. You may be thinking about the story. You're thinking, Oh, he's singing. If we could call it that? You may be thinking, what does it resonate with that story? Resonate with you? You may be thinking it's sunny today and not paying any attention at all. You may think, where did he learn that? What's it really about? Why is he doing this to us? So, there are lots of questions that you might be asking yourself about the song or not about the song in reaction to the song, in relationship with the song, and many other dimensions in which time play plays a part. But regardless of what those thoughts are, we've had shared time that shared eight and a half minutes - according to my car clock anyway - as I was timing it this morning on the way in, it's a shared time. It's a shared experience. We all take different things away from that. But we have shared space and time focused together on a central point. And reception theory tells us that you take away as much as I'm giving and vice versa, and I take something from each of you while singing the song. If somebody is looking at this, you know, I might sing a little faster or leave out a verse. If I'm looking at somebody who's very interested, then I'll turn on the waterworks, you know, and put a croak in the voice and make it more emotional. Not any of this really deliberately, but it does... There's a symbiotic relationship between us, and we play off each other in various ways. Even though we're all focused on the same thing, the experience is very different. Some of you might have thought it was an hour long- when's it going to be over. Another real Ballard enthusiast who likes the minutiae of such stories might have thought it was over quite quickly. Somebody used two MTV videos with 10 second jump cuts is not going to be able to pay attention to that sort of long storyline that's found in a ballad. So different experiences that we bring to the listening experience. James Porter talks about meaning being created in the space. Space is the word he uses between the singer and the listener. So, meaning... I have ideas of meaning in my head. You have ideas of meaning in your head. And somewhere we meet and create something collective as well as our own individual experience. But it's ephemeral and once that space is gone, that space that was created by the communication that was happening there, then that particular experience, place and time is gone. And we all take away a version of it in our heads. And as anybody who's looked at a study of eyewitnesses will know, what we take away in our heads is not necessarily what happened or what we heard. People have different ideas of how a song ended or the motivations of characters, and gradually over time sometimes those change quite a lot. **Ana maria** talks about the ballad pasted on to the linear flux of time. So, the ballad... time is moving on like the proverbial river and we sort of paste the valid on onto it for a little while. And so we take a little section of that river. What if time is circular? Of course, and we might sing that ballad again sometime? We might perform the same song

with the same group of people or a slightly different group. But nevertheless, there is an aspect of circularity to tradition, which might be a useful model as well, apart from the straight linear idea, which is actually a pretty recent idea about how culture works, how time works. You know, in the big picture, I think linearity is a fairly young concept. In fact, songs, as **merrily** suggests, may reflect an encounter between two differing ideas of how time works, the linear and the circular, and within a ballad singing tradition, like the Stewarts of Fetterangus here in the northeast of Scotland, where song is a part of life, are part of everyday routine, there's more of a circularity and within the ballads themselves in terms of their stories and their cycles and the patterns within them, you know, the David Buchan structural type patterns, there is a circularity as well. So, maybe there's a meeting of a couple of different cultures in the performed song. Now of course that song was just sung without any sort of preliminary information and it wasn't really unpacked as far as the story goes afterwards, whereas in a folk club situation or in a natural ballad singing situation, for want of a better term, or even Kenny Goldstein's induced natural context, there will be introduction to the song which contextualizes it setting its performance roots and its sometimes its historical setting as well. The Traveller tradition here in the north east of Scotland is very strong in this, in contextualizing...using, contextualizing narratives to frame the songs and the place and time and indeed the interpretation of the song. The Stewart family of Fetterangus, for example, use those stories to contextualize a ballad called *The Jolly Beggar*, which is in which they use opening narratives to set the scene for the song and talk about the king, the character in the song, not to tell the story of the song, but completely separate narratives that are attached to the song that they will tell either before or after. And you might want to join in here. *Sings The Jolly Beggar*.

[00:16:00] And so a story for an adventuring King dressed up as a beggar who goes from house to house, a song that resonates particularly with Travellers, because he's going from house to house, trying to find out how his subjects are getting on. At least that's what the legend says. The song doesn't actually say that. In fact, he's...We'll come to that in a minute. But there's a divergence between the plot of legends and the song, as performed by the Fetterangus Stewarts, certainly, a divergence that maybe explains why both forms continue to exist, because they're not the same thing. They don't tell the same story. And so both are needed. The legends fundamentally tell of a good-hearted king, curious about his subjects, anxious to protect them, whereas the ballads in strict strictly textual readings tell respectively of a king fond of casual seduction at best, and seduction/abduction or worse at worst. So, these narratives nevertheless are remembered and told together with the song clearly connected in the performers' minds. Perhaps the narrative has a didactic function around history, the social issues and social instruction as well. Lucy Stuart tells a James the fifth story, good King James, so-called it. She tells the story associated with him. That was the year of being that being thwarted through the offices of the king coming to rescue the young woman from the local laird. The ballad is streamlined, though it doesn't tell that story. It's reworked into entertainment. And there are ballads with a strong social message, of course, but this is not one of them. And despite his reputation in the historical record, as one scholar said, the most unpleasant of all, the Stewarts, which is going some. James V is persistently called good King James in Traveller tradition and indeed in broader Scottish history as well. In the Traveler community, this might be because of his historically benevolent attitude towards Gypsies, which was very out of step with other European monarchs at the time. So he becomes a figure of respect for them. Now, these contextualizing narratives function in three ways completion. Filling in perceived gaps in the story in some songs, or anchoring to fix the song into a relevant time period or education to develop an instructive aspect of the song's message. An example of completion is Stanley Robertson's *Willie o Windsberry*, where he introduces the song, sings that digresses as necessary to fill out details of plot and historical context. The time

framing sort of activity. This slide shows the integrated structure, and you're not intended to read that. Don't worry. It's not actually to be legible. It's meant graphically to show you the black bits here, the song and all this blue stuff here, rather more compact because it's not song lyrics, but look at the amount of information there. That's simply a singing...one rendition of Willie o Windsberry live, so to speak, with interpolated information almost every verse and quite a lot of it. Lots before, lots during. So it's quite a dramatic overlay on the song or interpolations within the song, and that is a kind of natural performance represented there on the screen for a ballad within Traveller tradition. It's not somebody standing up on a stage and singing their seven-and-a-half-minute ballad like I did just now to start. It's usually I won't say interrupted, but interspersed, with these contextual ideas and explanations. So there's the introduction is 159 words, prose interpolations, 247 words, song, lyrics of 335. So, a little bit more interpretation than song. So, it's about 40/60 song to interpolation. When he sang Son David for us in class in one of Ian's classes, the song was 4 minutes and 20 seconds, and the explanations right in and around the song were more than 11 minutes between 11 and 12 minutes. So, a huge amount really of contextual information built into the song. And Stanley was perfectly capable of taking a ballad and talking about it for 2 hours, during and after and before the song, the minutiae of of diction of why certain words were chosen, the historical background, who he got it from, which verses he didn't sing or did sing. He was also an extraordinary person in that he could jump into the scholarly lingo in and out of academe as well. He could talk about Child numbers and the history that Child talks about in his published versions of some songs. So, he had a huge constellation of information surrounding songs, almost endless, really. And we have some video recordings of him teaching a ballad class, you know, to our class, one song, sometimes even five or six verses would be unpacked in this way. And then you can appreciate the kind of depth that that ballad singing can acquire and sometimes needs to be understood properly in its social setting and its historical setting and its family settings. For anchoring, where we're explicitly tying a song to a historical period, Stanley also did that with the Bonnie Hoose o Airlie. It's set in the time of the Jacobite rebellions in the late 17th century. It's often mistaken to be about 100 years later. But Stanley was very, very much setting the song in its proper context. It historically belongs to about a century earlier than many people, and many people place it. In the education kind of song...the education contextualizing a social message is brought out of the song, and commentary is given a didactic spin which places the song within a social context. That space where families and children and adults learn about each other and learn about community and learn about how to move forward in the world. There's always a degree of didactic performance within Traveller tradition and sometimes in dialog as well with somebody who's sitting there in the audience and you get this to and fro communication between singer and listener as well. Place within songs. I want to turn now to being aware of the place around us as we're singing. We're here in a a curious library building, which is not necessarily the most obvious place to be singing ballads. But why not? So, the space between, as I said, is where meaning is created, and there's a real and virtual space of now the recent past that we just heard, that that verse we just heard. And each time you remember that in the future, that moment, you're recreating that moment in your head. Memory, it turns out, according to recent studies, is really reliving, recreate and your brain is actually reworking those electrical signals that that they were that were stimulated in the original experience. So thinking in imagination and thought therefore our reality because we're redoing them we're rethinking them. But by extension either of those songs also takes me to Fetterangus... me personally...because of having learned those songs from Elizabeth Stewart. Um, so I'm thinking about Lucy Stewart, her aunt... photographed by Kenneth Goldstein in 1959. Beautiful photo, I think. So, that's the place where Kenny Goldstein spent a year with them. So, I have an American connection with him and I have a connection with the family through visiting Elizabeth Stewart many times.

There he is, a young Kenny Goldstein with Lucy Stewart. And that takes me back in terms of my experience of their family with talks with Elizabeth about her grandmother being on the road, collecting rags. So, it's a life that isn't mine, obviously, and yet it is relevant to my experience of the song. And so it takes me to these different places and these different times. Elizabeth talks about, 'When I sing these ballads, I'm singing from the heart and I'm feeling that I'm part of the story. When I sing The Cruel Mother, I am the cruel mother I dinna condemn her for murdering her bairns, I think on how she was brocht tae that situation because of the times she lived in. And I feel that she's that the hurt that she's bearing because of what she did. These ballads really have the ability to make me physically ill because I feel the stories and the characters to be so real and so close to me. And that's all bound up in my family tae wi aul Betty, wi Lucy and my mother all cherished the ballads as much as I do, as I do, and like myself got very emotional singing them.' So she's in that world, she's within the song when she's singing it, and the song is having a very strong effect on her at once. Any of you who sing, and I think most of you do, once you're inside a song, you're there just like being at a movie, you know, you just place yourself in the story. So let's turn to time in the song itself. Once we got into the song, that first song seven long years ago, the time is framed as seven long years ago, and we have several aspects of time. These are not technical Latin cases, just some evocative terminology, I hope, past, now, the continuing present, ongoing things. Future is over here. And then in the future, way over there, that's Norway just over there. That's the distant future. So, the song moves through time pairs of past and now and then now and continuing present at these overlapping pairs as it moves forward, oscillating between time frames and slowly moving from past experience, as the song continues, into future hope or fate or both, and this gradual shift through the song from the past, over and done with, to the present and then on to future, keeps us awake and focused. It sets the scene, it draws us forward, pulls us forward in quite a dynamic way. So, with that song in the past, this is again, you don't really need to read the words, but think about as we go through the song time - this direction - we're moving from past stuff to things that's happening now, onwards to the future that might happen, and then finally to the future that is going to happen. Never no more. And that those lines particularly emphasize, you know, never no more. It's not just I can't come home again, folks. It's never no more. Can I come home again? And the line before that, actually, I find quite evocative because there's this 'when I'm gone, pray for me no longer' you know it's over. You've been praying for me this whole time, and that's good. You've done the right thing but pray for me...pause...no longer. At least I like to put a little bit of pause in there to create the ambiguity.

So, it's starting in the past year, seven long years since my true love left me and then into the continuing present when I go to my bed. This is sort of right now. I often wonder, often do pray. And then we move on after he appears and he's through the door and so on. We got this 'they kept walking and they kept talking' and that's never a good thing to do. Don't ever keep doing something in a story or a ballad because it's going to end badly. We have our indeterminate future. 'Will you ever really ever come home to marry me, will ye back to me home one day, sort of hoping something might happen, something positive. When he comes in through the door he's lost his colour. That's a telltale sign obviously.

He hasn't been to Ibiza, gotten a tan. 'You're nae like the young man I used to ken' well he's deid, so that makes sense. But that little reference to the past there linking the middle of the song, sort of crux of the song to that beginning, which was which was in the past seven long years ago. And then she makes a sort of final bid to keep him in the present. 'This is the son that you've never seen. And for some moments, the young man wept' moments. You know, right now the young man wept, a sort of final bid to keep him here in the present before he starts talking about I must away. 'I can stay no longer can you stay

no longer. And when I'm gone, pray for me no longer and never no more can I come home again'. So, we're firmly in the future - this ain't going to happen. So, that's the rest of the rest of her life and the rest of eternity dealt with there. My phone's quietly ringing in my pocket but unlike Paul Anderson during a NAFCo concert I shall not answer it - while he was playing, that was quite amusing. So, there are echoes of that first chart that I showed you of the progression through time with these little runs back in a sort of retrograde motion and then forward, you know, one step back, two steps forward. Getting through the song reminiscent of Bill McCarthy's and David Buchan's ballad structures. You know, the structural way of looking at song versus an annular patterning and that sort of thing. This isn't annular, obviously, but it's a kind of progression, that kind of zigzag progression. I should really draw a more sophisticated zigzag, obviously, but the overall motion through that song is as we go through time, we move further and further away from the past. So as the song moves that seven and a half minutes that we all experienced, so too the verses and language within it are moving along so that the first verse, even if we sung the first verse last, it would be that past time. So, I think the motion through the song, the time that we spend listening to the song is reflected in that progression through time within the song. So, outside the song, time is moving. Inside the song, time is moving, which I think is quite, quite clever of the of the songmakers. The present, although it is sweet, can no longer be and the present must always become the past, never to be revisited. And now it now is always then and the future always looms and it's gone. These pasts that we've created the moves from tends to tense are a little bit disquieting sometimes, and we don't quite know where we are. So as Christina pointed out yesterday, time orients us and also disorienting us. These disjunctures disorient us from our sure footings. Likewise, the Wife of Usher's Well as well has an analogous structure of past, present and future incremental progress. 'I dee mourn for my three bonny sons that death hae teen fae me' that's one of the earlier verses where things are in the past sort of scene setting. That's what happened. It fell upon the Yule time. Then we're getting into the right, into the present, where we're beginning to still past. But it's about to introduce the woman, the Wife of Usher's Well, actually taking part in the action. And then once, once her dead sons arrive, 'come ben come ben, my three bonnie sons come ben and sup me. And aa this hoose shall sup the nicht noo ma three sons are hale. Blaa up the fire ma maidens aa bring water fae the well and aa this hoose shall sup the nicht noo ma three sons are hale'

So, there she is rehearsing the future. There she's got her sons in front of her 'my three sons are whole. My three sons are here. We'll all have a meal. Perfectly normal, everyday things. Ghosts don't generally eat. They're not generally whole and the whole 'we're living' sense. So, she's mistaken there or she's just telling herself this is how it's going to be. It's going to be fine. Not to worry. Things are going to be fine, boys. But, of course, it isn't. 'We winna sup wi ye mither nor drink wi ony o yer wine, nor drink wi ony o yer well water though it come fae tap or turn'. Now they're not doing all those normal things directly. In contrast to what she's hoping for and expecting, she has had this aspiration and they're saying, no, that's not going to happen. They put their dead feet down. 'But the cock he crawled a merry mornin and he flapped his wings sae wide, and the eldest tae the youngest said, it's time we must away, for the cock he crawled a merry mornin and he flapped his wings sae wide, for the gate o heaven will be shut, and we'll be missed away'.

So, they have a more powerful ruler or, I suppose, interlocutor than her. They have to go to heaven. They have to speak to a higher power. So, now the ghost is rehearsing the future. If we do not obey our future will be found out and implied punished is what they're saying. You know, we have to get out of here. The gates of heaven will be shut, and they'll probably be punished with some typical balladic punishment, like ringing a bell for seven

years or something unpleasant like that. So on to another song now, Lord Gregory. *Sings Lord Gregory*

So we've got, again, past, present and future sort of simpler model a little hint of the past there. 'I'm a king's daughter now, I've strayed for Cappelquin in search of Lord Gregory May God I find him.' So that first verse has quite a lot of action, intense wise. So, we have the wind beats on my yellow locks pretty much in the present. The wind beats on my yellow locks and the dew does wet my skin. The baby's cold in my arms. Lord Gregory, let me in, little hint of the possible future there again rehearsing what she wants to happen. But then. The mother comes to the door and says, 'leave now these windows and likewise this hall for it's deep in the sea you should hide your downfall.' The fact that you're pregnant out of wedlock, you should go and drown yourself. And this is a bit cruel because we're always told we can rehearse our future but this is somebody else rehearsing her future. Nobody said that somebody else is going to rehearse your future, and that's the way it's going to be for you. Like death in the Stanley Robertson story that Sheena told yesterday, or death comes to Samarra, where you think you're rehearsing your future and then turns out somebody else is pulling the strings. So, she makes her version of the past. She makes her plea. Do you remember Lord Gregory? The past, this anchor of history that we have, which will inform us going forward? She makes her plea in the past there. 'Yours was fine linen, mine was coarse cloth.' That's all in the past. And then again, the mother back in the present. Leave now. Fuck off. So, the woman tries a couple of gambits, you know, she tries. I'm here right now the baby's cold, and the mother says, Go away. Then she tries. Okay. We have this history to fall back on. She says, go away. And the next section, what's going to happen next? Who's going to shoe the bairn's feet? Who's going to glove her hands? Who's going to comb her hair? And finally, she really tries to twist the knife there. Who will be the bairn's father til Lord Gregory comes home and the mother back in the present. Just keeping to her line, keeping to her storyline. 'Leave now these windows'. Just like a politician when they say, Minister, what about X? And he says, well, what I would say is this. He's got his message. He's staying on message. She's staying on message and controlling the fate of the woman by simply staying fixed in that time frame, not letting any of this other influence or any other evidence come into her purview or softening in any way. Then Lord Gregory wakes up. He gets passed that sort of time anchored past. 'I dreamt the lass of Arran or Aughrim was knocking at my door'. She's back in the present. Lie down. Lie down. Things are fine. Lie down and go to sleep. There's a little bit of future in there. And then this jump back to the past. So, she's now drawing on the past as authority. Don't worry. She's dead already. There's no point in worrying. It's all done. Go to sleep. Things will be fine. The past is gone. The present is a disaster and all that's left for him, really, is to rehearse his future. I'll go over the mountains and valleys so wild and off. I will find the last of Aughrim and I will lie by her side wherever she is. The future as it has become his refuge for hope and despair at the same time. So here in this song as well, we see this gradual progression forward from anchored past time to an uncertain, or rather since it's about a very uncertain and increasingly bleak future. The pattern shows that the woman tries these various gambits, you know, she tries the present argument, and the mother stays steadfastly in the present. She tries the past two tries for the future. None of these gambits work. So it's a kind really of incremental repetition, this this movement from past, present and present to future. And then back to these pairs, this sort of zigzag motion, a kind of incremental repetition or rather excremental repetition, as Bill liked to call it. It applies here to time as well as to language and the structure of the song. Incremental repetition is commonly said to push forward the action, but Bill always maintained that it was rather to retard the action to keep things building up slowly. You don't just move from A to B or A to F, you move from A to B, B to C, this. So, it's incremental. It's a way of slowing down the action of increasing the

suspense. Also giving the singer sometimes a bit more time with formulaic repetitions to think what they're doing. But I think the idea of retarding the action, building up a head of steam or a wall of water behind the dam before the end of the song for the denouement of the song is an important concept, and I think that's probably a better way to think of incremental repetition in general. So going back to connections between David Buchan's and Bill McCarthy's ideas of ballad structure, we can look at the tense thing as happening a couple of times within the song. So, the blue line would be the tense from past to present to future, but also in place when they talk about the past. It's over there and they're talking about the present. It's here now and the future. A couple of different places we could go. So, there are a couple of different places mentioned. So, the place patterning follows the time patterning quite well. And you might think about those places in terms of geography, since there is this sort of constellation, I like to think of tradition often as a constellation because there are all these dimensions. Everywhere you look, there's another connection that can be made. So, they were both in Coppoquin. They've now arrived here, the mother says, always over there, and they both end up going there. But she goes straight there and he sort of winds around - couldn't find a nice curvy line. But he winds around and finds himself beyond the beyond in the unknown, really waving in the deep. We don't know what the I mean, we know what the deep is, but we don't know where it is. It doesn't matter where it is, but it is a valid place. So, this is a journey towards the unknown and from the known, the lovers' common experience of Cappoquin where they met, exchanged handkerchiefs. And then to an unknown and probably nasty future, a divergence from the shared space and time towards a diverse and unshared space and time towards the unknown so that Annie, the woman, and Lord Gregory diverge. And then there's this artificial divergence. You know, they're six feet away from each other. He's in the castle asleep, and the mother isn't telling him. But according to the mother, he's elsewhere. So, there's this place divergence as a sort of virtual place divergence there. So, these songs link us to a distant past, a world a world less safe, less predictable, where travel and separation were difficult, dangerous, long and hard sometimes. And this is a song to, as Gerald Porter has shown, sung by Travellers in terms of their displacement and their differential social levels in society and the various rights that they had or didn't have. Can they express through singing this song, through taking this song on board and the story that it contains. For me, time and place in ballads are evoked within and outside the song, during the song or in discussing it, and part of the world with a well-defined then and soon, now, then and soon. And so to the outside of the song is evocative of where I heard it 20 years ago in the living room in Edinburgh this particular song and where that version comes from, which is that's the man I learned from, Cathal McConnell, you might recognize. And this is where his version of the song comes from. My wife's home county in Ireland, so I have lots of associations of place and time with that song in an external way. So, time and place are thus not shown to be absolutes, I think that's, you know, that's an obvious thing. We often feel and think them to be sort of absolute in some way, but rather they're fluid relative and simply functional aspects of language and experience aspects which, like much of folklore, help us make sense of the world and sometimes in challenging and unpleasant ways, but help us deal with what's to come. And I suppose rehearsing the future, however unpleasant that might be. So, thank you.

Speaker 1 [00:48:23] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.