UNRIDDLING
“CAME YE O’ER FRAE FRANCE?”

by
James Prescott

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND
The last Roman Catholic king of England, the Stuart James II, was overthrown by the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688, and fled to form a government in exile in France.

The throne of Great Britain was now occupied by two Protestant Stuarts, both daughters of James II by his first wife. Queen Mary (with William of Orange) reigned from 1688 to 1702, and Queen Anne from 1702 to 1714. When Queen Anne died without an heir, the throne passed to a new line, the Protestant House of Hanover (as had been arranged in the Act of Settlement of 1701). George I was the first king of this new line.

The Catholic James II died in 1701 and his second wife, Mary of Modena, became Regent in exile until James III came of age in 1706. James III (James VIII of Scotland), called in England the “Old Pretender”, made two major (and several minor) attempts to gain the throne. The first was the Rising of 1715 (the subject of this song). The second was the Rising of 1745 (led by his son Bonny Prince Charlie, called in England the “Young Pretender”).

Both attempts were failures, and although James III lived until 1766 the Jacobite cause was dead. It had attracted support in England for party political reasons; in Ireland for religious reasons; and in Wales and Scotland among Catholics and Protestants alike for reasons of dynastic loyalty (the House of Stuart was Scottish).

DATE OF COMPOSITION
The subject matter and style of the song indicate that it dates from after September 6, 1715, when the Earl of Mar (“Bobbing John”) raised the standard of James III at Braemar in Scotland, but before the Jacobite loss at Sheriffmuir on November 13. It is probably late September or early October. The Lowland levies and the clans are pouring into Perth, James III is expected to land at any moment from France with troops, weapons and money, and a rousing song is wanted to capture the high spirits of the day.

After Sheriffmuir the Jacobite songs became notably more sombre than this vigorous piece. The Marquis of Huntly (“Cockalorum”), referred to with favour in the last verse, fled during the battle of Sheriffmuir, and soon afterwards defected to the Hanoverians. These facts make it most unlikely that the song was written.
after the battle.

James III did not actually land in Scotland until December 22, and he left again on February 4 of the following year (1716).

**THE UNRIDDING**

The song has five stanzas. The notes for each stanza are in three sections following that stanza. The first section contains a glossary of the literal meanings of the words. The second section contains an interpretation of the non-literal meanings of the lines. The third section contains additional notes. The information in each section is keyed to the stanza by line number.

**1.0 FIRST STANZA**

The first stanza savagely attacks King George I of England, who had been imported from Hanover in Germany in 1714, who never learned English, and who was never very popular — even in England. It also attacks his mistresses.

- **Came ye o’er frae France?**
- **Came ye down by London?**
- **Saw ye Geordie Whelps,**
  And his bonny woman?
- **Were ye at the place,**
  Called the Kittle Housie?
- **Saw ye Geordie’s grace,**
  Riding on a Goosie?  

**1.1 Glossary**

- **Frae** == from
- **Geordie** == diminutive of George
- **Whelp** == a puppy; an ill-bred child
- **bonny** == comely
- **bonny woman** == a woman of loose character
- **kittle** == to tickle, to fondle, to excite; ticklish, difficult to deal with, fickle
- **kittle housie** == a dance hall, a whorehouse
- **Geordie’s grace** == His Grace King George I
- **Goose** == a goose; a prostitute
- **Goosie** == diminutive of goose; a pig; a fat and gross person

**1.2 Interpretation**

- **Whelp** == Guelph, a political faction (left over from the Middle Ages) to which the House of Hanover belonged
- **Geordie Whelp** == King George I

**3 Additional Notes**

1 Many Jacobites were in exile in France with James III.

6 What “Kittle Housie” refers to is uncertain. Macquoid and the author of Jacobite Minstrelsy suggest Parliament, which is not impossible. I would, however, favour St. James’s Palace, the principal residence of George I, his mistresses, and his children. For the first year or two of his reign he “lived a retired life in the bare palace of St. James’s”.

8 I believe that the ambiguity in this line is very deliberate. George I had imported two mistresses from Hanover. Schulenburg was George’s favourite and may have been secretly married to him. The other was Kielmansegg, his illegitimate half-sister. Schulenburg was emaciated and was called “The Goose”. Kielmansegg was corpulent and was called “The Sow”. Both were rather hideous. The author of Jacobite Minstrelsy says, “The one was a mountain of fat and grease, the other was as lean as a dried herring.” In England, Schulenburg was known as “The Maypole” or “The Beanpole” and Kielmansegg was known as “The Elephant”.

**2.0 SECOND STANZA**

The second stanza continues the attack on George I in a logical progression from his mistresses to his cuckoldry and the alleged illegitimacy of his son and heir, George Augustus. The metaphor involving cloth-making and cloth is introduced.

- **Geordie, he’s a man,**
- **There is little doubt o’ t,**
- **He’s done all he can,**
- **Who can do without it?**
- **Down there came a blade,**
George was. Before becoming the lover of Sophia Dorothea (George I’s wife), he had been the lover of Kielmansegg’s mother (among many others). He disappeared in 1694, when Kielmansegg’s mother (or George I, or George I’s father, or maybe all three) had him hacked to death (or roasted alive, or maybe strangled). His body was never found, having been burnt (or thrown into the river, or maybe dissolved in quicklime). Or, maybe, George Augustus himself discovered the body many years later while doing renovations. The historians seem to differ about these vital details. Kielmansegg’s mother had of course earlier been one of George I’s father’s mistresses.

2.1 Glossary
10 o’t == of it
13 blade == a gallant
14 link == to go arm in arm with, to move nimbly, to act with speed and energy
15 trade == a business; an exchange or substitution
16 loom == a loom; a metaphor for the female sexual organs

2.2 Interpretation
13 blade == Count Philipp Christoph von Königsmarck of Sweden
14 link == to make love
lordie == George I
15 trade == sexual business
16 loom of Geordie == George I’s former wife, Princess Sophia Dorothea of Celle

2.3 Additional Notes
9 Ironical.
10 George I had many mistresses and several illegitimate children.

11 Lines 11 and 12 are obscure to me. I conjecture that they refer to the sexual life of George I, particularly his cuckoldry, his lack of a wife, and his alleged over-compensation for this. George I was accused by Jacobites of “abominable acts” from incest and masturbation to homosexuality.

A similar phrase occurs in the song “The Wanton Wife of Castlegate”, which refers to the cuckolded husband in these lines: “And a whopping great pair of horns, me girl, your husband he shall wear. / ... / He can wriggle them at his leisure, he can do the best he can, / While his wife she takes her pleasure with a jolly boating man.”

12 Obscure to me. I conjecture that it may simply mean “who can do without sex?”

14 Königsmarck was chasing mistresses as madly as...
singer’s tartan plaid: “There was a wind it came to me, / Over the south and over the sea, / ... / And blew my plaid, my only stay, / Over the hills and far away.”

22 Many Jacobites had their possessions and lands confiscated, particularly after an abortive invasion in 1708. Identical complaints in songs date back to the ouster of James II in 1688. Compare, for example, the song “Willie the Wag”.

24 Ironical. Even though we have lost everything else that matters, we still have George I (or George Augustus).

4.0 FOURTH STANZA

The first three stanzas have attacked George I, and then lamented the absence of James III. Now the mood of the song changes from one of bitter sarcasm to one of bright and cheery optimism. The fourth stanza continues the reference to James III from the third stanza, establishes a new metaphor based on dancing, and sings of James’s imminent return to Scotland and the throne.

Jocky’s gone to France, 25
And Montgomery’s lady;
There they’ll learn to dance;
Madam, are you ready?
They’ll be back belive,
Belted, brisk and lordly,
Brawly may they thrive,
To dance a jig with Geordie. 32

4.1 Glossary

25 Jocky == a Scotsman
29 belive == soon, immediately
31 brawly == well, excellently, handsomely

4.2 Interpretation

25 Jocky == James III
26 Montgomery == Sidney, Earl of Godolphin
Montgomery’s lady == Queen Mary Beatrice of Modena, wife of James II and mother of James III

4.3 Additional Notes

26 “Mr. Montgomery” was the pseudonym of Godolphin, who had been until 1688 the devoted Chamberlain of Mary of Modena. His lasting infatuation for her “was of course
common knowledge”. There were rumours (which it was considered “in poor taste” to mention) that Godolphin’s devotion might have been more than strictly official. His love probably went unrequited. Although Godolphin rose to be Lord Treasurer (the head of the government) under Queen Anne, he remained a Jacobite, and corresponded with Mary of Modena in exile until his death in 1712. He frequently sent her gifts, with official government permission.

Mary of Modena was the most important Jacobite after James, was very active at the time in the cause, and was the only woman publicly associated with James III in 1715. MacQuoid says, “‘Montgomery’s lady’ may have been the lady of Lord James Montgomery, who was engaged in a plot in 1695, and who, it is likely, would be connected with the Jacobites.” I do not agree with his conjecture.

27 To dance == to raise funds, to raise troops and prepare to fight. Compare the song “To Auchindown”, which has the lines: “We joined the dance, and kissed the lance, / And swore us foes to strangers.”

32 To fight with George I.

5.0 FIFTH STANZA

The fifth stanza raises three rousing cheers for the leaders of the Jacobite forces in Scotland, inspires the troops, and promises glorious victory. The dance metaphor from the previous stanza is extended to include an evocative image of dancing swords and lances.

Hey for Sandy Don! 33
Hey for Cockalorum!
Hey for Bobbing John, 35
And his Highland quorum!
Many a sword and lance, Swings at Highland hurdie:
How they’ll skip and dance, O’er the bum of Geordie.

5.1 Glossary

33 Sandy == diminutive of Alexander
Don == diminutive of Gordon (the last syllable)
34 cockalorum == a young cock
36 quorum == a select company, a gathering of friends for social purposes
38 hurdie == the buttocks, the hips

5.2 Interpretation

33 Sandy Don == Major-General Alexander Gordon of Auchintool
34 Cockalorum == Alexander Gordon, Marquis of Huntly
35 Bobbing John == John Erskine, Earl of Mar
36 Highland quorum == either the hunting party on August 27 or the planning meeting on September 3
38 Highland hurdie == a Highland soldier

5.3 Additional Notes

33 An examination of prominent persons involved in the Rising reveals only one candidate for “Sandy Don” – General Alexander Gordon, who had 15 years of experience in the army of Peter the Great of Russia. This identification suggests the answer to another Jacobite riddle. In the 1715 song “Up and Warn All, Willie”, a “second-sighted Sandy” is present at the raising of the standard (as General Gordon was). In the 1745 song “The Hundred Pipers”, a “second-sighted Sandy” watches the army march away south with Prince Charlie. While too old in 1745 to fight himself, General Gordon was the “Nestor of the Rising” and “invaluable in counsel”. “Second-sighted Sandy”, while remaining a loyal Jacobite, foretold disaster for both Risings. The references in the two songs fit General Gordon like a glove.

34 As heir apparent to the Duke of Gordon and to the hereditary nickname of the Gordon (“Cock of the North”), the Marquis of Huntly enjoyed his own nickname (“Cockalorum”). He was the most senior active Jacobite noble during the Rising. As mentioned in the introductory material, he fled during the battle of Sheriffmuir, and soon afterwards defected to the Hanoverians.

35 The Earl of Mar was the incredibly inept leader of the 1715 Jacobite Rising. He had acquired
the nickname “Bobbing John” from his habit of frequently changing sides. By 1715 he had done so three times, and he did it three more times before his death. Tayler mentions that he may also have had a “nervous affection of the head”.

36 The Earl of Mar invited a large number of Scottish Jacobites to his estate at Bragmar on August 27, 1715, ostensibly for a hunting party. An “exclusive council” of 11 or 12 met with him at Aboyne on September 3 to plan the details of the Rising. It is not obvious which of these meetings is meant. Alexander Gordon the General (“Sandy Don”) and Alexander Gordon the Marquis (“Cockalorum”) were present at both meetings. Was the choice of these two in particular for mention in the song deliberate word play by the author?

38 Compare “The Chevalier’s Muster Roll”, of almost identical date and subject, which has the line: “For many a buttock bare’s coming”.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

I am a volunteer at WERU radio. WERU-FM is a new community radio station broadcasting out of a converted chicken farm in Blue Hill Falls, Maine. We are non-commercial, non-profit, and we play about 20 hours of folk music a week. We broadcast at an “effective radiated power” of 50,000 watts, which gives us a radius of 50-60 miles. The population of the area we reach is approximately 100,000 people. We have four paid administrators and 70 volunteers at this time. We went on the air May 1st, 1988. I host a weekly two-hour show of international folk music called “A World of Music”. I recently did a program on accordion music from around the world, and read aloud portions of “The Big Squeeze” from the BULLETIN during the French-Canadian part of the show. I was a good resource to have.

Is it possible for you to print a notice about my show and our new station in the next BULLETIN? I play a lot of Canadian music, as the station is closer to Canada than to any of the United States. I’d like to get more Canadian music for the station, both French and Anglo (Maine has a large French community, though not in our immediate area). If anyone is interested in donating LPs or CDs to the station, we’d love to have them. We can play cassettes, but they’re a pain to use, and so tend not to get aired. I don’t know what your policy is on something like this, but I don’t have many other ways to get Canadian content music, especially from smaller labels. If it is OK, please ask people to send their recordings, or catalogs of their recordings, to:

Debbie Suran
c/o WERU-FM
The Henhouse
Blue Hill Falls
ME 04615 USA

[Since this article was written, the song has also been recorded by Theresa Doyle on Prince Edward Isle Adieu (see BULLETIN, 21:4, p. 22). It is her version from which this transcription is taken. – Ed.]