

In Memoriam: Hamish Henderson 1919-2002

By Lorne Brown

The great Scottish folklorist and poet Hamish Henderson passed away in Edinburgh on March 8, 2002. He had been in a nursing home since last July, having suffered a mild stroke. February 25 he had a severe stroke and slipped away peacefully four days later, his wife and two daughters by his side. A great loss to Scotland, to the world of song, and to all who care about peace, justice, and freedom

Margaret Bennett, a colleague and close friend, said that over the past months she'd enjoyed many afternoons with him, reading, talking, singing, looking at photos, laughing, discussing. "He was as clear as could be; he even learned a new Gaelic song a couple of months ago ... Our lives are all more enriched for having known him and how we will miss him. The songs and memories will be with us forever and Friday (at the service) will no doubt have the biggest and heartiest rendition ever of 'The Freedom Come All Ye!'"

Hamish Henderson was born in Blairgowrie, Perthshire. During the Second World War he served in North Africa. *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica* (1948) chronicles that experience - the drama and horror of battle set against the tedium of military routine - and explores the moral implications of war.

His recent publications include *Alias MacAlias: Writings on Song, Folk and Literature* (1992), *The Armstrong Nose: Selected Letters* (1996) and *Collected Poems and Songs* (2000).

Writing about Hamish Henderson, Peter Haywood said, "Hamish's contribution to the folk revival is huge. His work at The School of Scottish Studies, his work with collectors like Alan Lomax and his involvement with The People's Festival Ceilidhs of 1951, 52 and 53, which were in many ways the predecessors of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, had an impact throughout Britain. A whole generation of young singers and musicians was exposed to a living tradition of folksong and classic ballads as the ceilidhs introduced performers such as Jessie Murray, Jeannie Robertson, Jimmy MacBeath, John Strachan, Flora McNeil and The Stewarts of Blair.

"Hamish has contributed several fine songs to the tradition including 'The Freedom Come All Ye', which has been put forward quite credibly as a candidate for a National Anthem. Many Scots would have difficulty in understanding the words, yet the song was and is sung - in Scots - all over the world. It is clear that the sentiment was easily understood. He never liked the idea of the song being seen as a National Anthem - in his view it wasn't a national anthem - but if people want it as an anthem, then his view was, 'Let them take it.'

Hamish rather thought that it could be an International Anthem and in many ways it has been that.

“The idea of writing a song to the first world war tune, ‘The Bloody Fields of Flanders’, came to Hamish after he had been up to the North East of Scotland seeing Ken Goldstein, an American who was attached to The School of Scottish Studies. It is a very optimistic song. ‘I felt that things were about to happen and they have happened. It’s a very different Scotland now from what it was in 1947.’”

When Henderson’s poetry won him a prize in 1949 of £660, the first time he had money, he took ten pounds and bet on the Grand National at odds of 66-1. He won, and doubled his fortune!

When in the late 1980s Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher offered him an O.B.E. (Order of the British Empire) he refused it, to no one’s surprise.

Amazingly, he was kept off BBC Scotland radio for fifty years, this man who had founded the School of Scottish Studies in the University of Edinburgh!

The late Edith Fowke, Ontario folklorist, was especially fond of Hamish Henderson; she even named her dog Hamish. It’s possible to imagine the two of them busily collecting more songs and stories up there in folklore heaven.

*Quo Daith, the world is mine.
I hae dug a grave and dug it deep
For war and the pest will gar ye sleep,
Quo Daith, the world is mine.*

*Quo Life, the world is mine.
An open grave is a furrow syne,
Yell no keep my seed frae faain in,
Quo Life, the world is mine.*

Hamish Henderson