UNRIDDLING "CAME YE O'ER FRAE FRANCE?"

by
James Prescott

Introduction

"This is another specimen of the vulgar mode in which the Jacobites displayed their wit. It is, nevertheless, a smart rant." (Jacobite Minstrelsy)

Many Jacobite songs are riddling – in part to steer clear of the laws against treason, and in part from a love of satirical wit that was widespread at the time throughout Great Britian. "Came Ye O'er Frae France?" is one of the most witty of the songs, and is packed with cryptic metaphorical and allegorical references. It is also a well-constructed piece of poetry, with each stanza carefully linked to the next. The song does not seem to have received as much attention as it deserves, a defect that I hope to remedy with this article.

I have sought to do four things. Firstly, I have tried to determine a date for the song. Secondly, I have provided translations for all words of the Scots dialect. Thirdly, I have sought to explain as many of the obscure references as possible. Fourthly, I have tried to highlight the poetical qualities of the song.

Words, Music and Author

All the sources I have consulted (see the Bibliography and the Discography) are in close agreement over the wording and punctuation of "Came Ye O'er Frae France?", which argues against any significant oral transmission for this song.

The excellent and distinctive tune does not seem to have been used for any other song. It has a difficult range of well over an octave, and does not end on the tonic.

As to the author, I am convinced that the song was written by one person, and that that person was a witty, well-educated and experienced songsmith who was closely involved with the Rising. In view of the very short period of one or two months within which the song must have been written, I think that someone specializing in the Rising might even be able to come up with a list of likely names.

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 UNRIDDLING

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? 1
Came ye down by London?
Saw ye Geordie Whelps,
And his bonny woman?
Were ye at the place, 5
Called the Kittle Housie?
Saw ye Geordie's grace,
Riding on a Goosie? 8

1.1 *Glossary*

1 Frae == from

3 Geordie == diminutive of George

whelp == a puppy; an ill-bred child

4 bonny == comely

bonny woman == a woman of loose character

6 kittle == to tickle, to fondle, to excite; ticklish, difficult to deal with, fickle

kittle housie == a dance hall, a whorehouse

7 Geordie's grace == His Grace King George I

8 goose == a goose; a prostitute

goosie == diminutive of goose; a pig; a fat and gross person

1.2 *Interpretation*

3 Whelp == Guelph, a political faction (left over from the Middle Ages) to which the House of Hanover belonged

Geordie Whelps == King George I

4 bonny woman == see line 8

6 Kittle Housie == St. James's Palace

8 Goosie == "The Goose", Countess Ehrengard Melusine von der Schulenburg, later Duchess of Kendal

Goosie == "The Sow", Baroness Sophia Charlotte von Kielmansegg, later Countess of Darlington

.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, 9
There is little doubt o't, 10
He's done all he can,
Who can do without it?
Down there came a blade,

Linking like my lordie;
He would drive a trade, 15
At the loom of Geordie. 16

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 Konigsmarck 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 Konigsmarck was chasing mistresses as madly as 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.

15 I think that the suggestion of "changeling" implied by the use of the word "trade" may be deliberate. See lines 17 and 18 below.

16 Sophia Dorothea took the wildly melodramatic Konigsmarck as a lover, perhaps in 1691. They attempted at least twice to escape together from Hanover. After his murder in 1694, she was tried by George for "malicious desertion", condemned, divorced and imprisoned for the rest of her life (32 years). Jacobites believed that the Prince of Wales, George Augustus (later George II), was the illegitimate son of Konigsmarck and Sophia Dorothea. George I and George Augustus "had not been on good terms when they came to England in 1714". George Augustus "hated him as a murderer".

3.0 THIRD STANZA

The third stanza refers, in an extended ironical metaphor, to both George I and George Augustus. The image of the loom connects it with the previous stanza, and the metaphor of cloth serves to introduce James III. The mood changes to a lament for the exiled king.

Though the cloth were bad, 17
Blithely may we niffer;
Gin we get a wab,
It makes little differ. 20
We have tint our plaid,
Bonnet, belt and swordie,
Halls and mailings braid –
But we have a Geordie. 24

3.1 *Glossary*

18 blithely == cheerfully

niffer == to exchange, to barter with objects hidden in the fists

19 gin == if

wab == a web, a length of woven cloth from one loom

20 differ == a difference

21 tint == lost (past participle of tine == to lose)

plaid == a Highland cloth

23 mailing == a leased smallholding, a farm

mailings braid == broad farmlands

3.2 *Interpretation*

17 cloth == George Augustus

19 wab == George I and/or George Augustus

21 plaid == James III

24 Geordie == George I and/or George Augustus

3.3 *Additional Notes*

17 Even though George Augustus is a bastard and thus from different stock than George I ...

18 ... can we cheerfully join the squabbling about exchanging them? Because George I and George Augustus did not see eye to eye, there quickly grew up factions favouring one or the other. By 1717 matters were so bad that George Augustus was expelled from St. James's Palace.

19 The rhyme scheme suggest that perhaps the word at the end of this line might not be "wab" but "wad". "Wad" has many meanings, including "a bundle" and "a forfeit". I have, however, found no interpretation convincing enought to permit replacing a word that is common to all sources. Perhaps the rhyme was defective when written.

20 Whichever George we get, there is little to choose between them.

21 The wearing of the plaid had been at various times prohibited by the government.

Compare "The Wind Has Blown My Plaid Away", which speaks of James III in metaphor as the 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, 30
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. 40

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 Braemar 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".

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[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.]