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Opening extract from

ABC My Grannie Caught a Flea Scots Children's Songs and Rhymes

Written by

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Introduction

Scotland is rich in many things, not least in our traditional children's songs and rhymes. Every Scots child and adult can sing 'Ally bally bee' and 'Ye canny shove yer grannie'. The other small rhythmic words we use to comfort or amuse very small people, and the vigorous games and funny rhymes we recall from playground days, will vary according to our age and where we were brought up. Older people lament that the young 'don't sing in the playground any more', but school playtimes are hotching with song and rhyme.

True, few of the pieces popular 40 years ago can be found in action today. The kids casually make new rhymes from snatches of TV commercials and popular song. They remake – and sometimes mangle – old pieces, and ruthlessly discard most that are fondly remembered by adults, but this has always been the case. Look into collections in books and archives – you will find thousands of childhood rhymes and songs that flourished, then faded away.

This book celebrates the richness of those older sources, combined with the fruits of the author's visits to Scottish schools from 1991 to 2006. The songs and rhymes are rich in vigour and bounce, direct language, the Scots voice, humour, observations on adult relationships that are sometimes sharp and sometimes naive, and surreal imagery.

As you read them, you will half recognise old favourites but often say, 'Those are the wrong words' because they are not what was used in your street or playground. Elements were trimmed off, shuffled, recombined, pruned, turned into nonsense, then into a new form of sense. I have included varying versions of a few to show how they grow and decline.

What are they for? For the children, amusement and to accompany physical activity, of course, but also for practising, developing and showing off language skills. For adults, fond memories of simpler times?

Sittin on Yer Mammie's Knee

Though few readers of this book were raised in a nursery, the term 'nursery rhyme' is usually attached to songs and rhymes that adults use when hushing and calming, manipulating and entertaining and developing language knowledge of babies and very small children. 'Baloo' was a favourite old Scots term for a lullaby, and our lullabies can be simple croons or wordy small songs. The rhymes to accompany 'teaching' body parts, bouncing, clapping and tickling are direct and rhythmic.

HUSHABAWS, BALOOS AND LULLABIES

For rocking the baby

Baloo lillie beetie
Mammie's at the creetie
For tae plick an tae pu
For tae gather lammie's woo
For tae buy a bullie's skin
Tae rock wir bonnie bairnie in
Orkney, Gossett, 1915

Baloo ma peerie lamb
Cuddle close to mammie
Mammie'll sing a bonny song
Ba ma prettie lambie
Orkney, 1961, SSS

Bonnie Jean o Fogieloan, she langed for a baby
She took her father's grey cat and rowed it in a plaidie
'Hishie bishie bow row, lang leggies ow ow
And twerna for your hairie mouthie
I wad kiss you now now'
Aberchirder, 1905, GD

Now balaloo lammy, now baloo my dear
Now balaloo lammy, ain mammie is here
What ails my wee bairnie? What ails it this night?
What ails my wee lammy? Is bairnie no right?
Now balaloo lammy, now baloo my dear
Does wee lammy ken that its daddie's no here?
Ye're rockin' fu sweetly on mammie's warm knee
But daddy's a-rockin upon the saut sea
Moffat, 1933

Hurr hurr dee noo, hurr hurr dee noo
Noo faa dee ower, my lammie
Hurr hurr dee noo, hurr hurr dee noo
Dere nane sall get my lammie
Hurr dee, hurr dee, mammie sall keep dee
Hurr dee, hurr dee, mammie is here
Shetland, Hendry & Stephen, 1982

Hush ye, hush ye, little pet ye
Hush ye, hush ye, dinna fret ye
The Black Douglas sall not get ye
Fraser, 1975

Hush-a-ba baby, lie doon
Your mammie's awa tae the toon
And when she comes back, ye'll get a wee drap
Hush-a-ba baby, lie doon
Aberdeenshire, 1908, GD

Hushie-ba, Burdie Beeton
Your mammie's gane to Seaton
For to buy a lammie's skin
To wrap your bonnie boukie in
Chambers, 1842

Baloo Balilli

Baloo balilli, baloo balilli
Baloo balilli, baloo ba

Gae awa, peerie fairies, gae awa, peerie fairies
Gae awa, peerie fairies, fae oor bairn noo

Dan come boanie angels, dan come boanie angels
Dan come boanie angels ta wir peerie bairn

Dey'll sheen ower da cradle, dey'll sheen ower da cradle
Dey'll sheen ower da cradle, o wir peerie bairn
Shetland, Buchan, 1962

Can Ye Sew Cushions?

O, can ye sew cushions and can ye sew sheets?
And can ye sing Bal-lu-loo, when the bairn greets?
And hee and ba birdie, and hee and ba lamb
And hee and ba birdie, my bonnie wee lamb

Hee o, wee o, what would I do wi you?
Black's the life that I lead wi you
Owre mony o you, little for to gie you
Hee o, wee o, what would I do wi you?
Chambers, 1842

Hey Dan Dilly Dow

Hey dan dilly dow, how den dan
Rich were your mither, gin ye were a man
Ye'd hunt and ye'd hawk, and keep her in game
And water your father's horse in the mill dam

Hey dan dilly dow, how den flowers
Ye'll lie in your bed till eleven hours
If at eleven hours ye list to rise
Ye'll get your dinner dicht in a new guise
Laverock's leg and titlin's tae
And aa sic dainties my mannie sall hae
Herd, 1776

Hushaba Babie

Hushaba, babie, lie still, lie still
Your mammie's awa to the mill, the mill
Babie is greeting for want of good keeping
Hushaba babie, lie still, lie still

Hushaba, babie, lie still and sleep
It grieves me richt sairly tae hear ye weep
Hee and ba lilliloo, down dilly dan
Sing hee and ba, birdie, my bonnie lamb
Moffat, 1933

Hush-A-Ba Birdie

Hush-a-ba birdie, croon, croon
Hush-a-ba birdie, croon
The sheep are gane to the silver wood
And the coos are gane to the broom, broom

An it's braw milking the kye, kye
An it's braw milking the kye
The birds are singing, the bells are ringing
The wild deer come galloping by, by

Hush-a-ba birdie, croon, croon
Hush-a-ba birdie, croon
The gaits are gane to the mountain hie
And they'll no be hame till noon, noon
Chambers, 1842

CHIN CHAPPIE MOU MERRY

Face-tracing – fingers climb
over the baby's head

Chin chappie
Mou merry
Nose nappie
Cheek cherry
Ee winkie
Broo brinkie
Ower the hills and awa
Forfar, 1948

Come ower the hillie
Chap at the doorie
Keek in
Lift the sneck
Dicht yer feet
And walk in
Forfar, 1948

I'll tell you a story
Aboot Johnnie Norry
He gaed up twa stairs
And in at a wee doory
MacLennan, 1909