

Lumphanan Paths Group – People and Places

Article 1: Stanley Robertson 1940 – 2009

by Ann Raeburn



“I’ll tak ye on the road again when yellow’s on the broom”

So goes the refrain to the Scottish folk song about Travellers taking to the road in Spring, chafing to sleep in the open air after a weary winter in a town tenement among townsfolk distrustful of Travellers.

Who were the Travellers? That mysterious nomadic band, not true Romanies nor settled citizens, they roamed the old roads and tracks of Scotland with tents and carts, loving their itinerant independent life. Their language was a mixture of Scots, Doric, Gaelic and Cant, or Traveller dialect. Ostracised by society, the Travellers kept to themselves, and so created their own customs and traditions, ancient clan names and hereditary craftsmanship. Perhaps the most defining part of their culture was their handing down of songs, ballads and stories, kept alive around evening campfire gatherings.



Photo courtesy of Scottish Storytelling Centre – Tree of Life Project

In the cemetery up Craigton Brae, overlooking Lumphanan village, lies the grave of the last of Scotland's Traveller Storytellers. Stanley Robertson, one of a Traveller family of 13 children, was born in 1940. Grown weary of increasing difficulties of a nomadic life on the road, the Robertson family settled in an Aberdeen tenement, but when the yellow's on the broom, Mr Robertson would pack his horse and cart and take to the road again with his wife and family.

They headed to Lumphanan and up the old track past the church. This old road defined Stanley's life. For Travelling folk it was a place peopled with spirits, with good and bad trees and Auld Cruvie, the venerable oak tree who had to be greeted every time they passed. The road itself was always addressed as "She".



Stanley Robertson on the Old Road of Lumphanan in Autumn 2007.
Photographer: Steve Webb

Near Glenshalg the Travellers would pitch their tents, bowed willow branches with a tarpaulin thrown over, butting onto the old stone dyke which protected them from the Northerly winds. Kindly folk at Glenshalg and Moss-side would give them eggs and milk, they would catch rabbits and guddle for trout in the burn. Nearby a spring flowed with clear water; Travellers only ever drew water for drinking from springs and never a burn.



Travellers' Bow Tents. Photo credit: The Scotsman

The old track would have been kept clear of broom, thanks to the children who gathered it for the fire and round that cheerful flame in the evening the stories would be told and songs sung. Stanley remarked later that broom smoke has been proven to have a mild narcotic effect and maybe this helped the telling of the stories of witches, demons, ghosts shouting “Boo” from their coffins, knights riding into battle and giants thrashing their clubs. Stories learnt from older members, often stretched over several nights, handed down over the centuries amongst the Travelling folk.

For young Stanley Robertson the old road of Lumphanan was a place of ancestral connection and timelessness. It was a love of place and inspiration that never left him, a green road that had known Travellers since time immemorial. Long after he reached adulthood and the travelling way of life truly died, he would return to walk this road and commune with the tales of his people.



Stanley Robertson sitting
beneath Old Cruvie

Photo credit: indigogroup.co.uk

Stanley spent 47 years of his adult life working in the dark reeking fish hooses of Aberdeen. Aged 15 he learnt to fillet fish, his hands sore from the brine and scunnered with the smell. Racism against the Travelling folk was common. At school he was bullied as a “Tinkie”; in the fish hooses he was often cut dead but in his head he was transported among the stories of his folk, and to his inspiration, the Old Road of Lumphanan.

Stanley, determined to keep the cultural traditions of the Travellers alive, published his 1st book of stories, "Exodus to Alford" in 1988. He followed this with other books and cds of Travellers songs.

In 2002 the Elphinstone Institute at Aberdeen University obtained a Lottery Fund Grant to research and promote the traditions of Scottish Travellers. Stanley was able to escape the fish hooses to become the guardian of his people's oral culture, one of the richest in Europe. He joined the Elphinstone Institute, gave talks, song recitals and never ceased to promote that rich seam of culture.



In 2008, the year before his death, his work was recognised with the title of Master of the University conferred upon him.

Lumphanan should be proud of their heritage - Stanley held the old road so dear to his heart that he chose Lumphanan to be his last resting place.

If you would like to hear the song, "The Yellow on the Broom", click here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfFb2hXEpN8&ab_channel=cheerydavie

For further reading:

Stanley Robertson: "Exodus to Alford", "Nyakim's Windows", "Reek Roon the Campfire" and many more.

Betsy Whyte's books: "The Yellow on the Broom" and "Red Rowans and Wild Honey"

Timothy Neat: "The Summer Walkers"