

THE ULSTER-SCOTS LANGUAGE SOCIETY

10th April 2003. On Inch Island in County Donegal, Elizabeth McLeister interviews Bertie Bryce. Born in 1920, Bertie farmed all his days and is a well known storyteller and raconteur.

Here, Bertie talks about the Irish Border and the Customs Men who ensured that no goods were smuggled between Northern Ireland and the 'Free State'. Following this introduction, he recites a poem called 'The Free State Farmer', written by Tom Molloy of Burnfoot, County Antrim.

[00:00:00.00] In my schooldays, it was unbelievable the power that the Custom Men had over us - and we lived in dread.

[00:00:11.24] Now we went out and in every day to Derry - Derry was our market town and it was where we did our business.

[00:00:19.16] And the Border came on and it was very, very difficult to begin with. And the Londonderry and Lough Swilly Railway, they ran across the Border.

[00:00:31.15] And she crossed the border at a place they called 'Bridge-End'.

[00:00:39.02] At that particular place, the Custom Men went through your pockets - they clapped ye and ye could have nothing.

[00:00:49.28] It was a pure.... It's unbelievable like in the present day and age that they could have took the shoes off your feet and sent you home in your sock-soles, if they had been bought in the North.

[00:01:00.21] You see the job was you went in with some oul thing that you threw away, and then you bought the new ones and you put them on;

[00:01:07.23] and it has been known that they took the shoes off their feet and sent them home in sock-soles. They had the power to do anything at all they wanted.

[00:01:15.23] But this particular poem now is entitled "The Free State Farmer" and it was written by a man the name of Malloy. Tom Malloy was a poet of no mean standing.

[00:01:26.15] He and the brother had a pub between them there in the village of Burnfoot and he wrote quite a lot of poems.

[00:01:32.16] But this is one that he wrote now that's entitled "The Free State Farmer" and, if I can get started, I can remember it now...

[00:01:43.01] As I said it was unbelievable the power they had and the fear that was instilled into you whenever you came to Bridge End where the train stopped and the Custom Men boarded her.

[00:01:54.05] The fear that was instilled into you because you were sure to have something. You didn't go into Derry and come back out again.

[00:01:59.23] Derry was the place, the terminus of the Londonderry and Lough Swilly Railway. You didn't go in there and come back out again

[00:02:05.23] You'd something with you, and never matter whether the man got it or whether he didn't.

[00:02:09.22] But this story anyway is entitled "The Free State Farmer" and it tells of the trouble that a man got into when he bought a new suit in Derry and took in hand to smuggle it out.

[00:02:22.09] And he did what they were always in the habit of doing - everybody did it. It went something like this:

[00:02:34.13] I am a Free State farmer, I come from Inishowen
My farm it is not very large, of bank books I have none.

[00:02:46.20] I toil along from day to day, I do the best I can,
I sell my butter and my eggs like any other man.

[00:02:54.11] Now Derry is my market town, it's there I get my meat,
My tea, my sugar and my bread, my herrings and pigs' feet.

[00:03:06.25] Some time ago my clothes were worn, I went into Derry town
And I left my measure for a suit, the tailor took it down.

[00:03:18.17] He said, 'Call back in three weeks' time and ready it will be,'
So I trotted off along the road to the State, they say is Free.

[00:03:32.00] My wife and I we talked things o'er, we talked daily day by day,
About how we'd get my suit across, no duty for to pay.

[00:03:41.23] Well the day came round, I went to town, I went to get my clothes,
Says I, 'I'll do these Custom Men, I'll do them to their nose:

[00:03:52.19] I'll throw these torn old rags away and I'll dress up like a toff'.
So with my parcel under my arm to the station I set off.

[00:04:02.20] Now I felt a wee bit guilty as I walked down the Strand,
I thought all hands was looking at me, I was a frightened man.

[00:04:13.26] But I picked an empty carriage for I had to be alone,
To smuggle out a suit of clothes to dear old Inishowen.

[00:04:23.13] The train steamed out past Pennyburn, I started to undress.
The old coat went out the window, likewise my pants and vest.

[00:04:30.16] But when I opened up my parcel, to my horror I did find
That there had been some mistake, the pants were left behind.

[00:04:39.19] Oh woe is me, oh woe is me, the game is all up now.
The shivering it came over me, and the sweat ran down my brow.

[00:04:48.25] I looked a picture of distress, naked and alone,
Steaming at sixty miles an hour to dear old Inishowen.

[00:04:59.05] Well the train pulled up at Galliagh Road, a clothes line hung nearby -
And a large pair of ladies' knickers there, flew high into the sky.

[00:05:10.24] I nipped out and I pulled them on, they fitted me to a T,
Says I to myself, a 'plus four' suit just makes a man o me.

[00:05:21.10] The Custom Man saluted me, he thought I was a swell,
But the wife, she damn near murdered me before I got time to tell.

[00:05:30.23] Oh never again, no never again, will I get out me lone,
To smuggle out a suit of clothes to dear old Inishowen.

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