



The Origins of Scotland's most Famous Lament

"Flowers of the Forest"

from The Argent Castle - Fall 1992

"The Flowers o' the Forest" is surely Scotland's most well-known lament. When played on the pipes, the strains of this haunting ballad stir the heart as almost no other can.

Those with a fine knowledge of the ancient balladry say this song fits well within that tradition--yet it is of relatively modern origin. In his Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border, Sir Walter Scott said "it required the most positive evidence" to convince him it was not old. It was written in the late 18th or early 19th Century by a daughter of Sir Gilbert Elliot of Minto, Lord Justice Clerk of Scotland, after he had made a wager that she could not write a song on the Battle of Flodden. Working from fragment of older ballads, she created her masterpiece.

Flodden had taken place some 200 years earlier, in 1512, but the memory and pain of that blackest of tragedies was imprinted on Scottish ears for generations. Lost at the battle were their king, James IV, 12 Scottish earls, 13 lords, 50 knights, five eldest sons of peers and 10,000 fighting men. Many songs and stories related how Queen Margaret in her bower at the Palace of Linlithgow, "all loneley sat and wept the weary hour", awaiting in vain the return of her King. Indeed, the people of Scotland refused to believe their King was dead for some time and there are stories about that.

"The Flowers of the Forest", coming late, could not, and cannot, be rivalled for its expression of deep sorrow. At the same time its soaring music, so ideal for the pipes, can elevate the spirit.

The seldom-heard words of the ballad, the Lowland Scots dialect, are also said to be the genre of ancient balladry:

I've heard for lilting, at the ewe-milking,
Lasses a' lilting, befor the dawn of day;
But now they are moaning on ilka green loaning;
The flowers o' the forest are a' wede awae

At buchts, in the morning, nae blithe lads are scorning;
Lasses are lonely, and dowie, and wae;
Nae daffing, nae gabbing, but sighing and sobbing;
Ilk ane lifts her leglen and hies her awae.

We'll hear nae mair lilting at the ewe-milking'
Women and bairns are heartless adn wae;
Sighing and moaning on ilka green loaning --
The flowers o' the forest are a' wede awae