

# Killed at the Crossroads

## *Travelling People*



My great-grandfather, he looked at me one morning, we was sitting down, minding the horses, we was, he said, 'My son, years ago, when I was a boy,' he said, 'See that place there, that park?' I says, 'Yes, Grandfather.' 'We used to stop on that', he said, 'twelve month, two year at a time. Till a lord came along', he said, 'he put a bit of fence up and that's how they got the ground', he said, 'by pinching it, bit by bit.' That's how you come your squires and your lords. They've no more right to that ground than what you or I have. The ground don't belong to no one.

AN OLD TRAVELLER FROM TRAVELLING PEOPLE,  
OF HIS GREAT-GRANDFATHER, BORN C 1830

## KILLED AT THE CROSSROADS – TRAVELLING PEOPLE

It was a perfect Radio Ballad subject. Apart from any other considerations, the Travelling People are now among the chief carriers of the English and Scots folksong traditions, a fact which made the choice of musical idiom a natural one. As custodians of many of the classic folk tales they number in their ranks storytellers of great skill. It was from these that the programme was to take its pace and overall style.

**I**n this extract from *Journeyman* Ewan MacColl goes on to say that he and Peggy Seeger had been recording Scots Tinkers and English Gypsies since 1960, on field trips scavenging ballads and tales before they disappeared from memory. Soon after they finished recording *Fight Game* they spent a couple of weeks in the 'bow-tents of Argyllshire Tinkers; in harvest fields and roadside pull-ins in Aberdeenshire, Perthshire and Banffshire; around campfires where storytellers told tales of the dead returning to the land of the living to pay off old debts.'

After that trip in the summer of 1963 Peggy writes a long letter with advice to Charles, who's about to go off interviewing English Travellers. In the winter most by now are 'settled', sometimes with a caravan on a designated site, sometimes in a sparsely furnished council house that they simply up and leave in the spring. But in the summer finding them can be extremely difficult for 'gorgios', as they call the rest of the population. They constantly move on, or, as their interviewers come to discover, are forcibly moved on. She warns Charles that Travellers are extremely guarded with outsiders, and only relax – a little – once convinced of your sincerity. A 'source' singer and old friend of Ewan and Peggy's, who would sing on the programme, takes them in hand:

We were really lucky to have had Belle Stewart with us. She got us into many places that we may never have known about and even had we known we might have just met distrust and hostility ... We found them to be like children, resentful of the way they've been treated the way a child is resentful, always saying 'We don't understand why?', instead of saying 'What shall we do about it?' They have no idea of organisation and although it might be easy to organise them it would be virtually impossible to keep them organised. Not only due to the fact that they are migrants, but because they compete against each other ... I really put my foot in it with a group of women by trying to get at ... [their] selling tactics. I asked 'What do you say when you go to a door hawking your soft goods?' Silence. So if they can't even combine their community knowledge, how to get them to organise?

This inability of Travellers to organise for their common good was still bugging her over 40 years later, though it wasn't for lack of will – on an earlier trip with them the American trade union organiser Bill Mencken was