

CHAPTER 21

Ballads of Accounting

Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger, 1964–89



Aince mair the poet's fa'en swack
And noo lies flat upon his back
In Bromley hospice
Whaur a' day, weel-faured sonsie lasses play
At piercing him wi' lang syringes,
And greet each new series of twinges
Wi' eldritch laughter,
And stroke the patient's head thereafter
While thinking up new ploys
And cantraips fresh
Tae execute on his poor flesh,
And here comes that auld wife Mistress Dracula
The deevil's dam for mair o' my blood.
Here, tak aff your dram.

EWAN MACCOLL, ON A POSTCARD TO BRUCE DUNNET,
WRITTEN FROM HIS HOSPITAL BED AS HE AWAITED HIS LAST
OPERATION, 12 OCT 1989, TEN DAYS BEFORE HE DIED

Four weeks before Charles Parker died he wrote to Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger in praise of their new album *Kilroy Was Here*. 'I am at a loss for words as I always am when I try to express what all of us owe to you both.' Charles had admired Ewan from the moment they met, so amazed was he by Ewan's talents. In consequence Charles castigated himself severely after a forthright article by Gillian Reynolds appeared in his support in *The Guardian* in November 1972, as news was emerging of his sacking by the BBC. The article unintentionally raised Ewan's hackles by referring to Charles Parker's Radio Ballads, and occasional further occurrences in the years to come would generate more tension.

This wording was unfortunate, if understandable. It was all part of the campaign to persuade the BBC not to sack him, and radio reviewers then as now tended to cite the producer of programmes rather than the writer, as to a notorious extent do film reviewers, for whom writers seem not to exist. Charles needed all the support he could get. He was at a low ebb at the end of 1972, but so too was Ewan. Peggy – and it had taken a long time for her own crucial contribution to be credited – wrote to Charles on Ewan's behalf. Charles apologised promptly in letters published in two broadsheet newspapers, saying that if any one person deserved the plaudits for the Radio Ballads' success it was Ewan, but the damage had been done.

Ewan felt wounded – it was the second time he had been written out of history. The eventual success of Theatre Workshop after it settled down in East London had been built on the years of drive, energy, writing and ideas he had put into radical theatre with Joan Littlewood after they met in 1934. But now it was Joan's Theatre, and he had been forgotten. Now it was happening again. Just as Charles had put years into the BBC, only to see it eventually spurn his ideas, vision and methods, so Ewan had with the theatre. Now in 1972 he was recovering from seeing yet another imaginative venture founder – the Critics Group. This had brought him via folk music back to the theatre. It had begun in 1965 when he and Peggy were asked to provide study sessions for young aspiring folk singers. It was soon a superb weekly training ground in singing, songwriting and performance, but in early 1972 it had broken up with such acrimony that Ewan was, in Peggy's words, totally devastated. Its misjudged title referred to self-criticism, but by outsiders it wasn't seen that way.

The Critics Group

The folk revival that had begun in the mid 1950s was alive and thriving ten years after the Radio Ballad period ended. Ewan and Peggy had been running their successor to the Ballads and Blues, the Singers Club, since 1961. They had become virtuoso performers in great demand all over the country and in North America, giving concerts that were rigorously rehearsed and