

The Slaying of Lady Mondegreen

by David Hunter

Way back in the last century, about the mid-1950s to be more precise, there was a rise in the popularity of traditional folk music throughout the English-speaking world. At that time, columnist Sylvia Wright became aware of an embarrassing revelation. As a child she had heard the Scottish ballad *The Bonny Earl of Moray* and for the longest time believed that the opening stanza went like this:

Ye Hielands and ye Lowlands
Oh whaur hae ye been?
They hae slain the Earl of Moray,
And Lady Mondegreen.

"Poor Lady Mondegreen," thought Sylvia Wright. A tragic heroine dying with her liege, "how poetic!" When she discovered some years later that what they had actually done was slay the Earl of Moray and lay him on the green, Wright was so distraught by the sudden disappearance of her heroine that she

THE BONNY EARL O' MORAY

Ye Hielands and ye Lowlands,
O, whaur hae ye been?
They hae slain the Earl o' Moray,
And laid him on the green.

Now wae be tae ye, Huntly,
And whairfore did ye sae!
I bade ye bring him wi' ye,
But forbade ye him to slay.

He was a braw gallant,
And he rid at the ring;
And the bonny Earl o' Moray,
He micht hae been a king!

He was a braw gallant,
And he play'd at the ba';
And the bonny Earl o' Moray --
The flower amang them a'!

He was a braw gallant,
And he played at the glove;
And the bonny Earl o' Moray,
He was the Queen's true love.

O lang will his lady
Look frae the Castle Doune
Ere she see the Earl o' Moray
Come soondin through the toon!

Anon.

memorialized her in one of her columns with a neologism. From then on, her newly coined word "mondegreen" became synonymous with a lyric heard or misinterpreted incorrectly.

This reminds us of the child who came home after Sunday School and told his mother that he had learned a new song about a cross-eyed bear named Gladly. It took the mother a while to realize he was talking about the hymn "Gladly The Cross I'd Bear!"

Or how about the wee girl who thought that the Battle Hymn of the Republic included the famous line "He is tramping out the vintage where the great giraffes are stored!"

And I'm sure you absolutely do not want to hear about the Scotsman who thought that Nat King Cole's famous song was "Fly me to Dunoon" and that the Beatles had a song called "Lucy in disguise with diamonds!"

OK. I can hear the groans! I'm hoping that the only saving grace might be that our readers have a few closet "mondegreens" of their own up their sleeves!

But getting back to the ballad of *The Bonny Earl of Moray*, the story is actually based on a historical incident going back to 1592. At that time, the Earl of Moray was married to Elizabeth, the cousin of King James VI of Scotland. The king suspected that Moray had previously made an attempt on his life along with the Earl of Bothwell.

Because of this, King James issued a warrant for Moray's detainment in 1592, and ordered George Gordon, the Earl of Huntly, to hunt him down and carry out the arrest.

However, a long-standing feud existed between the two of them and rather than arrest him, Huntly killed Moray outside Moray's castle in Fife.

Legend has it that Moray's mother took the corpse to Holyrood Palace where it lay uninterred for months. So it would indeed be a long time before the Earl's lady would hear the sound of him coming through the town!

The castle that she would be looking down from was Castle Doune just north of Stirling. Dating back to the 11th century it was the hereditary home of the Moray family. However, in more recent times, the castle has achieved fame of another kind. It was used as a film set in the irreverent comedy *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* and in the BBC/A&E television miniseries based on Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*.



Castle Doune in Perthshire near Stirling from where Lady Moray would look in vain for the return of her slain husband. The Morays were the hereditary keepers of the castle.

The one she would not be looking down from is the Castle Doune we have here in Canada! (We have at least one.) Most likely familiar to residents of the Hamilton, this one was once part of the Dundurn Castle estate, believed to be the old dower house or gate lodge.

Back in 1988, the castle was purchased by Carl Koprivas and his wife Pat who proceeded with extensive renovations.

Once the property of Sir Allan MacNab, the prominent Hamilton resident who became joint premier of United Canada in 1854, it was one of the buildings designed and built by architect Robert Wetherell between 1835 and 1840.

The Hamilton Castle Doune was enlarged in 1908 to include a turret and rounded bay corner.

Apparently there was a mysterious tunnel which once connected it with Dundurn Castle and which by 1988 had collapsed.

So if any of our Hamilton readers happen to be in the vicinity of Locke St. North and Tecumseh St. with a camera, how about sending us a photo? ■

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Castle Doune featured in the TV miniseries "Ivanhoe"