

Samuil Marshak And 'Ding Dong Dollar' – An Early 1960s Scottish Political Songwriting Project

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This is the story, many of whose details are previously unpublished, of how eminent Russian translator Samuil Marshak came to be involved in translating the lyrics of some songs from a Scottish songwriting project opposing Polaris nuclear weapons, into Russian, for publication in the former USSR.

By 1961, Samuil Marshak, then 74, was a renowned figure in Russian literature. He was a translator, poet and leading writer for children, and had received many honours and awards in the USSR for his literary work.

He also had a particular connection to Scotland. Some aspects of that connection are well known, in both Scotland and the former USSR. This article focuses on some of the less well-known aspects.

When Marshak came to the UK in 1912 as a student, he developed a great love for literature in English, much of which he went on to translate into Russian, including Shakespeare, and many leading British poets, and folk ballads from England and Scotland.

However, it was his love of the poetry of Robert Burns which was to prove important, particularly in the context of this story. Marshak would go on to become a major translator of Burns, to the point where it is believed that one volume of his translations of the Scottish poet sold a remarkable 600,000 copies in the USSR. Indeed, such was this success and the popularity of Burns in the USSR that the USSR honoured the poet by placing his face on postage stamps in 1956 – a decade before Burns was similarly honoured in the UK.

However, well before this, Marshak himself was recognised by some in Scotland as a leading and inspirational literary figure. One of them was Hamish Henderson, who had then not yet moved into the field of folklore for which he is now known. Henderson, not yet 30 and a few years before his work began as a folklorist at the University of Edinburgh, was a member of the Scottish-Soviet Society, a non-political body aiming to promote cultural ties between the two countries. In May 1948, on behalf of a group of writers associated with the Society, Henderson wrote to Marshak, inviting him to visit Scotland.

Marshak did indeed visit Scotland, but for a number of reasons, this did not happen for another 7 years, until his visit in January 1955. On that occasion, his visit of 17-26 January coincided with Burns' 25 January birth-date and was hosted by the Society. While his time in Scotland was brief, it was well-publicised. Contemporary newspaper reports suggest Marshak was warmly received.

We wondered if Marshak and Henderson had ever met. In the early 1950s, Henderson began working at the then recently-established School Of Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh, where Henderson would work until his retirement in the late 1980s. To our surprise, we came across a photograph of Marshak and Henderson at the National Library of Scotland. We asked if the School had a visitor book entry for Marshak on either of his Scottish visits – and

received confirmation that he had indeed visited Henderson, at the School, on 24 January 1955, the date of the photograph.

Marshak visited Scotland a second time, on this occasion in late August and early September 1959. At this time, Marshak's connection to Burns deepened with his growing involvement in the World Burns Federation, and he went on to become President of the Federation in 1960. There was to have been a third Scottish visit, in 1960, in connection with Marshak's new role at the Federation, but he was too ill to travel.

Meanwhile, in the mid to late 1950s, several bodies had emerged with a dual interest in Scottish home rule politics and also in Scottish song and poetry. The best known of these, which met periodically at Bo'ness near Edinburgh, was the Bo'ness Rebels Literary Society. A participant in the Society was Morris Blythman, a languages teacher in a Glasgow secondary school. One important legacy of the Bo'ness Society was the songbooks it published in the 1950s, of which the first appeared in 1954. At one point in the 1950s, someone passed Marshak a copy of at least one of the songbooks and he is believed to have been interested by the folksongs there.

This was of course the Cold War era. In late 1960, the UK Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, announced that the Government had given consent to a request by the US Government that the US Navy be authorised to establish a base in Scotland, on the River Clyde, for submarines armed with Polaris nuclear missiles. This was a controversial decision. There already was an established campaign against nuclear weapons, evidenced by the annual 'Aldermaston' peace marches which began in 1958. Also, the site for the US base, at the Holy Loch, was just 30 miles from Scotland's main population centre, Glasgow.

The base opened in March 1961. Amongst those opposing Polaris was Morris Blythman. He led a campaign which involved several activities - songwriting, publication of the songs in a series of songbooks, singing the songs at demonstrations and also recording some of the songs. Jim McLean was another leading contributor of songs. Henderson was another contributor. Overall, at least 13-14 people contributed at least one song, with several of the songs being written collaboratively. It became the world's first family of songs, written as a song family, opposing nuclear weapons. As well as opposing Polaris, some of the songs expressed republican views and also supported Scottish political independence. The project was titled 'Ding Dong Dollar' (DDD), named after one of the songs, to which both McLean and Blythman contributed.

One of the strongest supporters of the peace movement was South Ayrshire Labour MP, Emrys Hughes. Hughes, the son-in-law of Scottish Labour leader Keir Hardie, was – amongst other things - a leading spokesman for the peace movement in Britain. However, he was not involved in DDD. He was also a very close friend of Samuil Marshak. For example, on one of his visits to Scotland, Marshak had been Hughes' house guest. The two men appear to have first met at a Union Of Soviet Writers conference, possibly at the Union's base in Vorousky Street, in Moscow. There is a photo of the two men, taken in February 1959, on the occasion of the celebration in Moscow's Tchaikowski Hall of the 200th anniversary of Burns's birth.

We were puzzled about how Marshak came to hear of DDD. However, during our research, we discovered from an unpublished private interview that, during Summer 1961, Blythman and Hughes met at a Labour party event in Scotland, when Blythman, who was selling the latest

edition of the DDD songbook, used humour to persuade Hughes to buy a few copies of the six-penny publication.

Shortly after this, in Moscow, Marshak became ill. That September, apparently on Marshak's request, Hughes travelled to Moscow, to stay with his friend – and, it appears, took the DDD songbook with him. Marshak revived enough to not only take an interest in the songbook but translated several of the songs for publication.

The first of his translations to appear in print was 'Ding Dong Dollar' itself. Marshak's translation appeared on the front page of Izvestia newspaper, dated 24 September 1961. Not only that, but the Marshak translation had been performed shortly prior to that – Hughes' diary suggests on 13 September – by pupils at a school in Moscow, the city's No. 112 school, informally known as the 'Pushkin' school. The school then had a long-standing interest in Robert Burns and Scottish culture in general.

On his return to the UK, Hughes was interviewed by the Guardian newspaper, which reported that Marshak had translated up to half a dozen of the DDD songs and the performance by the pupils. Eventually we discovered that a group of Marshak's DDD song translations had been published in a literary magazine, 'Foreign Literature' (Inostrannaya Literatura), which specialised in translations of interesting literature from beyond the USSR.

We managed to trace the October 1961 edition of the magazine. It contains translations of four more DDD songs – 'The Polis O Argyll', 'K K Kennedy', 'Cheap Jack The Millionaire' and 'The Misguided Missile'. These four songs, plus 'Ding Dong Dollar', are all drawn from the particular edition of the songbook which Hughes purchased from Blythman.

The DDD story throws up interesting twists. Many of the songs were recorded and appeared on a record album in 1962 – but, ironically, the album was released in the US only, by Folkways Records, with the title 'Ding Dong Dollar - Anti-Polaris And Scottish Republican Songs'. The album was not released in the UK (including Scotland, where the songs had been written and recorded) until 1969, by Transatlantic/Xtra, when it was re-titled 'Scottish Republican Songs'. By this time, the widely reported demonstrations at the Holy Loch were much less frequent, so the context for the DDD songs had changed considerably.

Conversely, while no-one involved in DDD performed the songs in the US, they were performed in the other major super-power of the day, the USSR – not only in Autumn 1961 by the school pupils mentioned above, but also by a member of the DDD team, Josh MacRae, a singer/guitarist, who performed them at an international peace conference (the World Congress for General Disarmament and Peace) in Moscow in July 1962. He wrote about his experiences during the visit, including meeting Yuri Gagarin and recording a song for him while in Moscow.

In 1962, when the poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko visited Britain, he met Hamish Henderson, who gave him a copy of the record album of DDD songs released earlier that year in the US by the Folkways record company.

Marshak died in 1964, Hughes in 1969, MacRae in 1977, Blythman in 1981 and Henderson in 2002. By 1982, the US Navy had replaced Polaris with Poseidon missiles. The later, longer-

range Trident missiles meant that the Holy Loch base became less essential. The US base was closed in the early 1990s, in turn closing the Polaris era.

Marshak's DDD translations are little known in Scotland and the UK, and this part of the DDD story proved to be amongst the most difficult to research. For their help in piecing together this story we thank Anna Vaninskaya (Senior Lecturer in English Literature, School Of Literatures, Languages and Cultures, University of Edinburgh); the British Library; the Russian State Library, Moscow; The National Library Of Scotland; Cathlin Macaulay (School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh); and Jenny Carr and Margaret Tejerizo (former and current Chair, Scotland Russia Forum).

Stewart Black has been researching the story of DDD. Jim McLean was one of the leading members of the DDD songwriting team. They have worked together to research Marshak's role in DDD.