

Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832)

7 *Elspeth's Ballad*

“As the Antiquary lifted the latch of the hut, he was surprised to hear the shrill tremulous voice of Elspeth chanting forth an old ballad in a wild and doleful recitative:” —

The herring loves the merry moon-light,
The mackerel loves the wind,
But the oyster loves the dredging sang,
For they come of a gentle kind.

Now haud your tongue, baith wife and carle, 5
And listen great and sma',
And I will sing of Glenallan's Earl
That fought on the red Harlaw.

The cronach's cried on Bennachie, 10
And doun the Don and a',
And hieland and lawland may mournfu' be
For the sair field of Harlaw. —

They saddled a hundred milk-white steeds,
They hae bridled a hundred black,
With a chafron of steel on each horse's head, 15
And a good knight upon his back.

They hadna ridden a mile, a mile,
A mile, but barely ten,
When Donald came branking down the brae
Wi' twenty thousand men. 20

Their tartans they were waving wide,
Their glaives were glancing clear,

The pibrochs rung frae side to side,
Would deafen ye to hear.

The great Earl in his stirrups stood, 25
That Highland host to see:
“Now here a knight that’s stout and good
May prove a jeopardie:

“What would’st thou do, my squire so gay,
That rides beside my reyne, — 30
Were ye Glenallan’s Earl the day,
And I were Roland Cheyne?

“To turn the rein were sin and shame,
To fight were wond’rous peril, —
What would ye do now, Roland Cheyne, 35
Were ye Glenallan’s Earl?” —

“Were I Glenallan’s Earl this tide,
And ye were Roland Cheyne,
The spear should be in my horse’s side,
And the bridle upon his mane. 40

“If they hae twenty thousand blades,
And we twice ten times ten,
Yet they hae but their tartan plaids,
And we are mail-clad men.

“My horse shall ride through ranks sae rude, 45
As through the moorland fern, —
Then ne’er let the gentle Norman blude
Grow cauld for Highland kerne.”

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He turn’d him right and round again,

Said, Scorn na at my mither;
Light loves I may get mony a ane,
But minnie ne'er anither.

50

1816

(From *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott*. Ed. J. G. Lockhart. Edinburgh: Robert Cadell, 1841)