

# The Water Is Wide (song)

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"**The Water Is Wide**" (also called "**O Waly, Waly**") is a folk song of Scottish origin, based on lyrics that partly date to the 1600s. It remains popular in the 21st century. Cecil Sharp published the song in *Folk Songs From Somerset* (1906). It is related to Child Ballad 204 (Roud number 87), *Jamie Douglas*, which in turn refers to the ostensibly unhappy first marriage of James Douglas, 2nd Marquis of Douglas to Lady Barbara Erskine.

"The Water Is Wide"	
Song	
<b>Written</b>	Unknown
<b>Published</b>	1906
<b>Genre</b>	Folk

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## Themes and construction

The imagery of the lyrics describes the challenges of love: "Love is handsome, love is kind" during the novel honeymoon phase of any relationship. However, as time progresses, "love grows old, and waxes cold." Even true love, the lyrics say, can "fade away like morning dew."

The modern lyric for "The Water Is Wide" was consolidated and named by Cecil Sharp in 1906 from multiple older sources in southern England, following English lyrics with very different stories and styles but the same meter. Earlier sources were frequently published as broadsheets without music. Performers or publishers would insert, remove, and adapt verses from one piece to another: floating verses are also characteristic of hymns and blues verses. Lyrics from different sources could be used with different melodies of the same metre. Consequently, each verse in the modern song may not have been originally composed in the context of its surrounding verses nor be consistent in theme.

## Variants

*The Water is Wide* may be considered a family of lyrics with a particular hymn-like tune.

*O Waly Waly* (Wail, Wail) may be sometimes a particular lyric, sometimes a family tree of lyrics, sometimes *Jamie Douglas*, sometimes one melody or another with the correct meter, and sometimes versions of the modern compilation *The Water is Wide* (usually with the addition of the verse starting *O Waly, Waly*). Benjamin Britten used the melody and verses of *The Water is Wide* for his arrangement—which does not have the *O Waly, Waly* verse, yet is titled *Waly, Waly*. A different melody is used for the song *When Cockleshells turn Silver Bells*, also subtitled *Waly, Waly*. Yet another melody for *O Waly, Waly* is associated with the Lord Jamie Douglas lyric.

## Ancestors

A key ancestor is the lyric *Waly, Waly, Gin Love Be Bonny* from Ramsay's *Tea Table Miscellany* (1724), given below. This is a jumble of verses from other lyrics including *Arthur's Seat shall be my Bed* (1701), *The Distressed Virgin* (1633) and the Scottish scandal ballad *Jamie Douglas* (1776).

The use of *cockleshells* and *silver bells* in Thomson's version (1725) pre-dates the earliest published *Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary* (1744) and may relate to torture.<sup>[1]</sup>

Some though not all versions of *Jamie Douglas* have the first verse that starts 'O, Waly, Waly'. Andrew Lang found a variant verse in Ramsay's *Tea Table Miscellany* from a sixteenth-century song.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Cousins

Predecessors of *The Water is Wide* also influenced lyrics for other folk and popular songs, such as the modern version of the Irish *Carrickfergus* (1960s) and the American *Sweet Peggy Gordan* (1880). The Irish song *Carrickfergus* shares the lines *but the sea is wide/I cannot swim over/And neither have I wings to fly*. This song may be preceded by an Irish language song whose first line *A Bhí Bean Uasal* ("It was a noble woman") matches closely the opening line of one known variation of Lord Jamie Douglas: *I was a lady of renown*. However, the content of the English-language *Carrickfergus* includes material clearly from the Scots/English songs not in any known copy of *A Bhí Bean Uasal* suggesting considerable interplay among all known traditions.

## Descendants

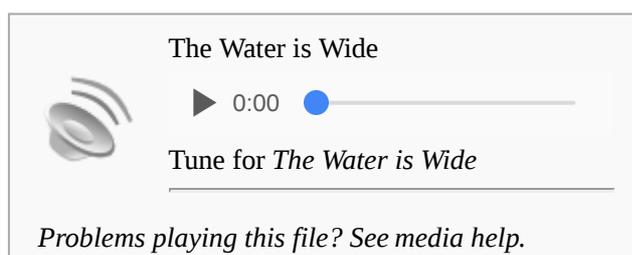
The modern *The Water Is Wide* was popularized by Pete Seeger in the folk revival. There have been multiple subsequent variations of the song and several names—including *Waly, Waly, There is a Ship*, and *Cockleshells*—which use and re-use different selections of lyrics. The song *Van Diemen's Land* on the album *Rattle and Hum* by U2 uses a variation of the melody of *The Water Is Wide*.<sup>[3]</sup> The song "When the Pipers Play," sung by Isla St. Clair on the video of the same name, uses the melody of "The Water is Wide."

## Lyrics

### Waly, Waly, Gin Love Be Bonny

The lyrics for "Waly, Waly, Gin Love Be Bonny" from Ramsay's *Tea Table Miscellany* (1724).

O Waly, waly (a lament – "woe is me") up the bank,  
And waly, waly doun the brae (hill),  
And waly, waly, yon burn-side (riverside),  
Where I and my love wont to gae.  
I lean'd my back into an aik (oak),  
I thocht it was a trusty tree;  
But first it bow'd, and syne (soon) it brak (broke),  
Sae my true love did lightly me.



O waly, waly, but love be bonnie (beautiful),  
A little time while it is new,  
But when 'tis auld (old), it waxeth cauld (cold),  
And fades away like the morning dew.  
O wherefore should I busk my heid (adorn my head)?  
Or wherefore should I kame (comb) my hair?  
For my true love has me forsook,  
And says he'll never love me mair (more).

Now Arthur Seat shall be my bed,  
The sheets shall ne'er be fyl'd by me,  
Saint Anton's well shall be my drink,  
Since my true love has forsaken me.  
Martinmas wind, when wilt thou blaw (blow),  
And shake the green leaves off the tree?  
O gentle death, when wilt thou come?  
For of my life I am weary.

'Tis not the frost, that freezes fell,  
Nor blawing snaws (snow) inclemency,  
'Tis not sic cauld (such cold) that makes me cry,  
But my love's heart grown cauld to me.  
When we cam in by Glasgow town,  
We were a comely sight to see;  
My love was clad in the black velvet,  
And I my sell in cramasie (crimson).

But had I wist (known), before I kiss'd,  
That love had been sae ill to win,  
I'd lock my heart in a case of gold,  
And pin'd it with a silver pin.  
Oh, oh! if my young babe were born,  
And set upon the nurse's knee,  
And I my sell were dead and gane,  
For a maid again I'll never be.<sup>[4]</sup>

## **The Water Is Wide**

Some popular lyrics for "The Water is Wide" are within the book *Folk Songs For Solo Singers*, though many versions have been printed and sung.

The water is wide, I cannot get over  
Neither have I wings to fly  
Give me a boat that can carry two  
And both shall row, my love and I

A ship there is and she sails the sea  
She's loaded deep as deep can be  
But not so deep as the love I'm in  
I know not if I sink or swim

I leaned my back against an oak  
Thinking it was a trusty tree  
But first it bent and then it broke  
So did my love prove false to me

I reached my finger into some soft bush  
Thinking the fairest flower to find  
I pricked my finger to the bone  
And left the fairest flower behind

Oh love be handsome and love be kind  
Gay as a jewel when first it is new  
But love grows old and waxes cold  
And fades away like the morning dew

Must I go bound while you go free  
Must I love a man who doesn't love me  
Must I be born with so little art  
As to love a man who'll break my heart

When cockle shells turn silver bells  
Then will my love come back to me  
When roses bloom in winter's gloom  
Then will my love return to me

Jürgen Klos traces the first verse to "I'm Often Drunk And Seldom Sober" (c. 1780), the second to "The Seamans leave taken of his sweetest Margery" (c. 1660), the third to "Oh Waly, Waly, Gin Love Be Bonny" (already 'old' when published in c. 1724), and the fourth to "Hey trollie lollie, love is jolly" (c. 1620.) He could not trace the melody before 1905.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Round

The Water is Wide  
I Cannot get over  
**Nor** have I Wings  
With which to-o-o fly  
O-o-h give me a boat  
That can carry Two  
We both shall Row  
My friend and I-i-I

(repeat twice in parts with one part higher than the other and then sing in round with group two beginning to sing at the word 'Nor')

## Another version

The water is wide  
I cannot get o'er  
No wings have I  
No wings have I to-o fly  
Give me a boat  
That will carry two  
We both shall row,  
my friend and I.

Verse 2:  
As I look out  
across the sea  
a Bright horizon beckons me

And I am called to do my best  
and be the most  
that I can be.

### **Another version, from Australia**

#### **The Voyage Home**

The water is wide, I cannot get o'er  
And neither have I wings to fly,  
Build me a boat that can carry two  
And both shall row, my love and I.

I leaned my back up against an oak,  
To find it was a trusty tree,  
I found you true, love, when first you spoke,  
'tis true you are, and ever shall be.

Our love shines clearly against the storm,  
Turns darkest night to brightest day,  
Turns turbulent waters to perfect calm,  
A blazing lamp to light our way.

Love is the centre of all we see,  
Love is the jewel that guides us true,  
No matter what, love, you'll stay with me,  
No matter what, my love, I'll stay with you.

The water is wide, I cannot get o'er  
And neither have I wings to fly,  
Build me a boat that can carry two  
And both shall row, my love and I.

## **Recent renditions**

### **Arrangements**

"O Waly, Waly" has been a popular choice for arrangements by classical composers, in particular Benjamin Britten, whose arrangement for voice and piano was published in 1948. John Rutter uses it for the Third Movement in his "Suite for Strings" (1973).<sup>[6]</sup>

The tune is often used for the hymn "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" by Isaac Watts.<sup>[7][8]</sup> It is also the tune for John Bell's "When God Almighty came to Earth" (1987)<sup>[9]</sup> and F. Pratt Green's "An Upper Room did our Lord Prepare" (1974).<sup>[10]</sup> Additionally, Hal H. Hopson used the tune for his work "The Gift of Love". Hopson also wrote Christian lyrics to The Water is Wide, which are often performed by church choirs.

Mack Wilberg has arranged the tune to "Thou Gracious God" by Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., which the Mormon Tabernacle Choir performs in the album *Peace Like a River*.

### **Recordings**

Classical singers who have recorded "O Waly, Waly" include Maura O'Connell (Irish Alto), Sir Thomas Allen (English baritone), Janet Baker (English mezzo-soprano), Ian Bostridge (English tenor), Sarah Brightman (English soprano), Alfred Deller (English counter-tenor), Anthony Rolfe Johnson (English tenor), John Langstaff,<sup>[11]</sup> Richard Lewis (English tenor), Felicity Lott (English soprano), Benjamin Luxon (English bass-

baritone), Derek Lee Ragin (American countertenor), Aksel Schiøtz (Danish tenor), Daniel Taylor (Canadian counter-tenor), Robert Tear (Welsh tenor), Frederica von Stade (American mezzo-soprano), Carolyn Watkinson (English mezzo-soprano), and Kathleen Ferrier (English contralto). The King's Singers have a setting combined with the cello solo from J. S. Bach's Suite no. 1 on their British Isles folk song album, "Watching the White Wheat".

The Library of Congress audio archives contain a recording of the American composer Samuel Barber singing this tune and accompanying himself on piano in a recital broadcast from the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia on 26 December 1938.

"The Water is Wide" has also been recorded countless times, with popular renditions by Maura O'Connell (Irish Alto folk singer), June Tabor (1976 solo album, *Airs and Graces*), Angie Aparo, The Highwaymen, The Seekers, Peter, Paul and Mary (titled "There is a Ship"), Sheila Jordan (*Lost and Found*, 1989), Cowboy Junkies, Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, Rangers, Joan Baez, Fred Neil, Enya, Steeleye Span, Karla Bonoff, James Taylor, John Gorka, Daniel Rodriguez, Luka Bloom, Steve Goodman, Eva Cassidy, Rory Block, Tom Chapin, Kathy Hampson's New Elastic Band, and Ed Gerhard.

Mark Knopfler recorded an instrumental version of "The Water is Wide" following the death of musician Chet Atkins, who had collaborated with Knopfler in several musical projects.

The lyrics vary from period to period and from singer to singer.

Carolyn Hester recorded the song twice, first on her self titled LP for Tradition Records in 1960, then on her *Live At Town Hall* in 1965, but not released until 1990.

The Kingston Trio released a version under the title "The River is Wide" in 1961. The New Christy Minstrels recorded this same melody in 1963 with entirely different lyrics, arranged by Randy Sparks and retitled "Last Farewell".

Roger McGuinn of the Byrds recorded the song on his first solo album (1973).

Cliff Richard has a version on his 1982 album *Now You See Me, Now You Don't*.

Neil Young wrote new, environmentally themed lyrics to the tune, and recorded it as "Mother Earth (Natural Anthem)" on his 1990 album *Ragged Glory*.

Karla Bonoff recorded a version that is included on the 1991 soundtrack for the US television program *thirtysomething* and was used to conclude 2006 airing of episode 94 ("Solo") of the fifth season of the TV show "Alias".

French singer Renaud helped make the tune famous among French-speaking countries. He wrote pacifist lyrics to the song "La ballade nord-irlandaise" (the Northern-Irish Ballad) for his 1991 album *Marchand de cailloux*, evoking the troubles of Northern Ireland. The Breton group Tri Yann also recorded a French version "La Mer est sans fin" (the Sea Is Endless), in addition to a Breton version "Divent an dour". The first French version is "La mer est immense" (The sea is Wide) by the New-Zealander singer Graeme Allwright on his 1966 album *Joue, joue, joue*

The American-born Taiwanese artist Leehom Wang included a rendition of this song on his 1995 debut album, *Love Rival Beethoven*.

In the late 1990s Jewel, Sarah McLachlan, and the Indigo Girls collaborated on a version of the song in concert on the Lilith Fair tour.

Barbra Streisand included "The Water is Wide" paired with "Deep River" on her 1997 *Higher Ground* album.

The *Two Worlds* album released by jazz musicians Lee Ritenour and Dave Grusin in 2000 included a performance of *The Water is Wide* combined with *Shenandoah* sung by the soprano Renée Fleming.

American jazz artist Charles Lloyd recorded *The Water Is Wide*, a CD released in 2000 on ECM Records with Lloyd (tenor saxophone) John Abercrombie (guitar), Brad Mehldau (piano), Larry Grenadier (double-bass), and Billy Higgins (drums). The Charles Lloyd Quartet released another version of the song on the *Mirror* CD (2010), with Lloyd (tenor saxophone), Jason Moran (piano), Reuben Rogers (bass), and Eric Harland (drums).

Charlotte Church, the Welsh child soprano, recorded a popularised rendition of this song on her 2001 album *Enchantment*.

Eva Cassidy's version was released posthumously on her 2003 album *American Tune* as well as on the 1994 bootleg album *Live at Pearl's*.

American jazz pianist Eyran Katsenelenbogen recorded this song on his album *It's Reigning Kats & Dogs & Bogen*, released in 2003.

Chloë Agnew, the youngest member of Celtic Woman, recorded this song for her album *Chloë* (2002) with the help of composer David Downes.

Runrig, the Scottish Gaelic rock band, recorded this song for their first *Access All Areas* album (2001).

In 2006, Triniti released the song on their self-titled debut album, as did Órla Fallon on the album of the same name.

Hayley Westenra's album *Treasure*, released in 2007, contained another version. This is not in the made in the EU version of *Treasure* 2007, but is the second track in Haley Westenra's album *Odyssey* made in the EU 2005 / 2006.

Masaaki Kishibe's 2008 album *My Favorites* includes a fingerstyle acoustic guitar rendition, instead incorporating the vocal melodies into the guitar melodies. American pianist, John Laing features this song on his debut album *Awakened* and it features Brittany Benish on guitar.

Alexander Armstrong recorded the song on his 2015 solo album, *A Year of Songs*, with an orchestral accompaniment.

John Gorka sang the song on the 1998 album "Where Have All The Flowers Gone", a two-CD celebration of Pete Seeger songs by numerous artists.<sup>[12]</sup>

Schoonerfare sang "The Water is Wide" on their 2005 album, titled "And Both Shall Row."

The thirtieth album of the band Oregon called *Lantern*, released in 2017 on CAM Jazz, contains a version of the song as arranged by Paul McCandless.

## **In film**

It played in the opening and closing credits of the 1964 film, "Nobody Waved Goodbye."

Bob Dylan and Joan Baez rendered a version of the song for Bob Dylan's 1978 film, *Renaldo and Clara*.

It was performed by Susanna Hoffs in the film *Red Roses and Petrol* directed by Tamar Simon Hoffs, as part of the soundtrack.

It was used over the final scenes in Terence Davies' 1988 film *Distant Voices, Still Lives* as the characters disappear into the darkness.

The song was played repeatedly as part of the soundtrack to the film *The River Wild* (Universal Pictures, 1994). A version recorded by Cowboy Junkies was used during the end credits.

The lyrics of the song are spoken, just before the assassination scene, by Jesse James' daughter in the 2007 film *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*.

It was used as a musical motif throughout the 2001 film *The Simian Line*.

It was performed by a blind fiddle player in the 1984 film *The Bounty*, starring Anthony Hopkins and Mel Gibson.

It was performed by Yukawa Shione as part of the festival in the 2005 Japanese film "Linda Linda Linda".

It was used during end credits of the 1996 TV film *Homecoming* starring Anne Bancroft.

It was used in TV drama "Boardwalk Empire", first season.

Gerard Way is confirmed to have recorded the song for Kevin Smith's film *Tusk*.<sup>[13]</sup>

PJ Harvey recorded this song in 2014 for the second season of BBC Two's "Peaky Blinders".<sup>[14]</sup>

In the episode *The Magdalen Martyrs* of the Jack Taylor TV series the character Kate Noonan played by Nora-Jane Noone sings this song in a pub.

## In popular culture

### Television

The CBS TV series "The Unit" featured an episode in season 2 entitled *The Water is Wide*, in which Unit members must disarm a bomb in the office of the Secretary-General of the UN, while their wives seek an alleged POW/MIA soldier in Vietnam.<sup>[15]</sup>

## References

1. Mary Mary Quite Contrary ([http://www.rhymes.org.uk/mary\\_mary\\_quite\\_contrary.htm](http://www.rhymes.org.uk/mary_mary_quite_contrary.htm))
2. *The Water Is Wide (song)* at Project Gutenberg
3. *Van Diemen's Land* (<http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=920>) on songfacts.com
4. Ramsay, Allan (1788). *The Tea-table Miscellany, Or, A Collection of Choice Songs, Scots and English* (<http://www.google.ca/books?id=6bIDAAAQAAJ>) (Twelfth ed.). Wilson. p. 170.
5. "The Water Is Wide The History of a Folksong" (<http://www.justanothertune.com/html/wateriswide.html>).
6. See British Classical Music: The Land of Lost Content (<http://landoflostcontent.blogspot.com/2008/04/john-rutter-suite-for-strings.html>).
7. "When I survey the wondrous Cross" (<http://www.oremus.org/hymnal/w/w299b.html>). Oremus.
8. *Common Praise*. Canterbury Press. 2000.
9. When God Almighty came to Earth ([http://www.billysloan.co.uk/songs/when\\_god\\_almighty\\_came\\_to\\_earth.html](http://www.billysloan.co.uk/songs/when_god_almighty_came_to_earth.html)).
10. An upper room did our Lord prepare (<http://www.oremus.org/hymnal/a/a258.html>).
11. His performance is available on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p4lWTcHVqAY>).
12. allmusic.com
13. <http://kroq.cbslocal.com/2014/04/09/gerard-way-records-new-song-for-kevin-smith-horror-film-tusk/>
14. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p028p6b0>
15. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0956034/>

## External links

- Recording by May Ip (in oggvorbis format) from a session in Wales in 1993, made available in the free downloads of May Ip's personal website.
- Sample lyrics and MIDI
- Recording of "The Water Is Wide" by the Beers Family at the 1963 Florida Folk Festival (made available for public by the State Archives of Florida)
- Lyrics and some information
- The Water is Wide (traditional, UK/USA; circa 1724) (video) – about history of the song
- Mirror (2010) sample
- Lyrics of this song at MetroLyrics

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