

CHAPTER 5

Man of Many Parts

From Theatre to Folk Song



A fine documentary play, dealing fearlessly and poetically with the crucial problems of our day ... Marlowe is in the wings ... Why is it being ignored?’

SEAN O’CASEY, THE IRISH PLAYWRIGHT,
ON READING EWAN MACCOLL’S URANIUM 235 IN 1949

The main objective of the series was to show that Britain possessed a body of songs that were just as vigorous, as tough, and as down-to-earth as anything that could be found in the United States.

EWAN MACCOLL, IN JOURNEYMAN,
ON HIS 1953 RADIO SERIES BALLADS AND BLUES

One of the entrepreneurial successes of the immediate post-war period in England was the holiday camp, an opportunity for cheap and cheerful holidays, fresh air and fun, for largely Northern working-class families. At the Butlin's camp in Filey, on the bracing Yorkshire coast, entertainment was laid on in a massive tent – ballroom dancing, music hall variety turns, wrestling. But whether you were a holidaying miner or a visiting *News Chronicle* reporter, the last thing you would be expecting after the wrestling was a radical theatre group playing Lorca, Molière and MacColl.

MacColl? Who was he? And a play about nuclear energy called *Uranium 235*? The reporter there that afternoon in the May of 1946 blinked in disbelief, but went back and described something very different from what he'd imagined, a 'theatrical event of the greatest importance.' The play's name hadn't been announced, which was probably as well, and the packed Butlin's audience took it as it came, as if it was a game of football, as Ewan would say later:

They cheered, groaned, shouted their approval, and when one of the actors tried to make a planned interruption from the auditorium they howled him down... It was a triumph and a complete vindication of everything we had said about the theatre. A working-class audience could be won for a theatre which concerned itself with the social and political problems of our time ... what was regarded as wildly experimental by theatre buffs and representatives of the theatre establishment was accepted by our Butlin's audience as a perfectly sensible way of doing things. 'And the wonderful bare stage!' enthused our theatre friends. But it wasn't bare to our audience ... If there were moments when they regretted the absence of 'real' sets and stage furniture, there were other things to stimulate the imagination, such as the amplified sound of machines, passing cars, railway trains, explosions, whispering voices, announcements of news items ...

How does the new theatrical voice of Jimmie Miller, reborn as Ewan MacColl after the war, become the voice of the folk singer who Peggy Seeger met in a Chelsea basement ten years after his *Uranium 235* excited an afternoon audience at the seaside? He was still a theatre man through and through – Peggy would see him later that first day performing in the West End in a part that bridged his two worlds, the street singer in Bertolt Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*. But the theatre had been usurped in his affections by an interest long dormant. The British folk song revival was under way, and Ewan would play a crucial part in that national awakening.

After Jimmie Miller absconded from the army in December 1940 he turned up briefly at the home of his parents, where Betsy burned his uniform in the boiler and gave him her blessing, before he moved in with the Theatre Union actress Rosalie Williams. She was alone in a big Victorian house in the Manchester suburb of Urmston, vacated by parents who had gone to the USA. It became the unofficial wartime HQ for the company's