

# The Skye Boat Song

Chorus

Verse

## Harold Boulton's lyrics:

### Chorus:

Speed, bonnie boat, like a bird on the wing,  
Onward! the sailors cry;  
Carry the lad that's born to be King  
Over the sea to Skye.

1. Loud the winds howl, loud the waves roar,  
Thunderclaps rend the air;  
Baffled, our foes stand by the shore,  
Follow they will not dare.

### Chorus

2. Many's the lad, fought in that day,  
Well the claymore did wield;  
When the night came, silently lay  
Dead on Culloden's field.

### Chorus

3. Though the waves leap, soft shall ye sleep,  
Ocean's a royal bed.  
Rocked in the deep, Flora will keep  
Watch by your weary head.

### Chorus

4. Burned are their homes, exile and death  
Scatter the loyal men;  
Yet ere the sword cool in the sheath  
Charlie will come again.

### Chorus

## Robert Louis Stevenson's lyrics:

### Chorus:

Sing me a song of a lad that is gone,  
Say, could that lad be I?  
Merry of soul he sailed on a day,  
Over the sea to Skye.

1. Mull was astern, Rùm on the port,  
Eigg on the starboard bow;  
Glory of youth glowed in his soul;  
Where is that glory now?

### Chorus

2. Give me again all that was there,  
Give me the sun that shone!  
Give me the eyes, give me the soul,  
Give me the lad that's gone!

### Chorus

3. Billow and breeze, islands and seas,  
Mountains of rain and sun,  
All that was good, all that was fair,  
All that was me is gone.

### Chorus

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"The Skye Boat Song" is a late 19th-century Scottish song recalling the journey of Prince Charles Edward Stuart (Bonnie Prince Charlie) from Benbecula to the Isle of Skye as he evaded capture by Government troops after his defeat at the Battle of Culloden in 1746. He hid in the moors of Scotland, always barely ahead of the government forces. A reward of £30,000 was offered for him but no Highlanders betrayed him. Charles was assisted by supporters such as pilot Donald Macleod of Galtrigill, Captain Con O'Neill who took him to Benbecula and Flora MacDonald who helped him escape to the Isle of Skye by taking him in a boat disguised as her maid "Betty Burke". He ultimately evaded capture and left the country aboard the French frigate *L'Heureux*, arriving in France in September.

Sir Harold Boulton, 2nd Baronet composed the lyrics to an air collected by Anne Campbelle MacLeod in the 1870s. According to Andrew Kuntz, a collector of folk music lore, MacLeod was on a trip to the isle of Skye and was being rowed over Loch Coruisk (*Coire Uisg*, the "Cauldron of Waters") when the rowers broke into a Gaelic rowing song "*Cuachag nan Craobh*" ("The Cuckoo in the Grove"). MacLeod set down what she remembered of the air, with the intention of using it later in a book she was to co-author with Boulton, who later added the section with the Jacobite associations.

Alternative lyrics to the tune were written by Robert Louis Stevenson, probably in 1885. After hearing the Jacobite airs sung by a visitor he judged the words of this song to be "unworthy", so made a new set of verses "more in harmony with the plaintive tune".

It is often played as a slow lullaby or waltz and entered into the modern folk canon in the twentieth century with versions by Paul Robeson, Tom Jones, Rod Stewart, Roger Whittaker, Tori Amos and many others.

The song was first published in **Songs of the North** by Boulton and MacLeod, London, 1884.

It was recorded by Alfred Deller on **Western Wind** (1958), Calum Kennedy on **Songs of Scotland and Ireland** (1971), Rod Stewart (two versions) with The Atlantic Crossing Drum & Pipe Band on **Atlantic Crossing** (1974 - 1975).