

Gaelic Oral Poetry in Scotland: Its Nature, Collection and Dissemination

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In embarking on a general survey of the oral poetry of Gaelic Scotland and its relationship to fieldwork and dissemination, we must first of all remind ourselves that we are dealing with a tradition – indeed an entire culture – that for historical reasons has remained largely remote and obscure for outside researchers; not only ethnologists, but a good number of Celticists as well. An evident factor, of course, is accessibility to the materials through the language, not only in its written forms providing first-hand access to manuscript or printed sources, but also in its colloquial or ‘heightened’ spoken forms encountered as an integral part of the experience of direct contact with traditions in the field. This assertion should not be understood as attempting to promote an impression of the unique nature or complexity of Gaelic tradition – it is merely intended to identify some of the causes of the marginalisation whose main result for our discipline is that the tradition is not widely known outside of the British Isles.

For these reasons I have chosen to undertake a general survey of Scotland’s Gaelic oral poetry within a general - and, I admit, varyingly focussed - framework of field collection, providing whatever basic information will be necessary as to its nature and content during the course of this presentation. Our discussion will be from an ethnological rather than a literary perspective. Throughout I intend to deal as much as

possible with materials that we would term ‘oral’, consisting largely of anonymous verse with the occasional composition from a known bard. From the outset it should be mentioned that with very few exceptions the oral poetry of the Gaels, at present and for a number of centuries, has been conveyed and transmitted *through song*, and the two remain inseparably linked in the consciousness of contemporary Gaels.

In addition to the oral poetry-song affinity, I would like to identify a small number of further themes that recur throughout our discussion and may serve to integrate what is in any case a wide-ranging and approach. The first is the constant *interaction between oral and written sources* in Gaelic poetry, which has been closely paralleled – and doubtless reinforced - by the same interplay in the history of Gaelic traditional narrative. It is useful to remember here that printed versions have been known to inform variants of oral poetry recorded from the most respectable of oral sources – versions or fragments thereof sometimes strikingly retained whose provenance is unknown to the reciters. The other major theme to be aware of for oral poetry is that of *continuity*, not only of texts, but also of form and indeed folk belief around composition, transmission, powers and associations. Many items recorded in the field can be traced back to late medieval times, and possibly earlier. This applies not only to the obvious materials such as the ballads from the Finn Cycle, whose ascendancy as the chief epic of Gaeldom began sometime around the 12th century, but to religious oral poetry as well, not to mention the famous song *Am Bròn Binn* ‘The Sweet Sorrow’, and its associations with the medieval Arthurian Cycle.

Some Early Accounts

Given the importance of the diachronic dimension to the notion of ‘continuity’, an orthodox Celticist might wish to choose – and rightly so – the formal, complex verse of the medieval Irish professional poets to aristocracy – settled members of the learned orders, and well remunerated – as a point of departure. Indeed, of some interest to us in understanding the elements that have shaped oral poetry is a description from the end of the 17th century by Martin Martin, a native of Skye, based on a tour of the Outer Hebrides:

‘The orators by the force of their eloquence had a powerful ascendant over the greatest men in their time ; for if any orator did but ask the habit, arms, horse, or any other thing belonging to the greatest man in these island, it was readily granted them, sometimes out of respect, and sometimes for fear of being exclaimed against by a satire, which in those days was reckoned a great dishonour: but these gentlemen becoming insolent lost ever since both the profit and esteem which was formerly due to their character; for neither their panegyrics nor satires are regarded to what they have been, and they are now allowed but a small salary I must not omit to relate their way of study, which is very singular : they shut their doors and windows for a day's time, and lie on their backs, with a stone upon their belly, and plaids about their heads, and their eyes being covered, they pump their brains for rhetorical encomium or panegyric; and indeed they furnish such a style from this dark cell, as is understood by very few; and if they purchase a couple of horses as the reward of their

meditation, they think they have done a great matter’
(Martin Martin: 176-77).

An account from an 18th century collector, Donald MacNicol of Glenorchy, has come down to us of the kind of exercises professional poets in Scotland were required to carry out during their training. Students were expected to compose a verse with the words *biadh* ‘food’, *sgian* ‘knife’, *muc* ‘pig’, *sgiath* ‘shield’ Interestingly, the resulting verse as given in the account (which may only be a burlesque) was not the kind that could be translated into polite conversation (Thompson 1983: 259).

In any case such a disciplined and economically regulated world is only part of the story. Equally worthy of our attention is a lower order of poets from the late middle ages, the *Cliar Sheanchain*, consisting of itinerant bands of accomplished poets and satirists along with other entertainers, who left behind notorious and colourful accounts of themselves throughout the Highlands and, I suspect, made a major contribution to the poetry of the common people that surfaced in the poetry of our modern community bards. As the surviving accounts demonstrate, these wandering bands contained common, often versatile entertainers – buffoons and musicians – who like many of their counterparts throughout Western Europe, were not adverse to an earthy presentation of themselves. An idea of the sort of entertainment provided may be gained from a depiction of their Irish counterparts from the late 1500s:

A Late 16th Century Irish Bardic Performance



An important Scottish account of the itinerant bards and other performers from the seventeenth century is contained in a letter from Professor James Garden of King's College, Old Aberdeen, in reply to queries received in 1692 from the antiquarian John Aubrey regarding various topics relating to Highland Scotland. Garden obtained an account from a divinity student, the son of a gentleman from Strathspey, describing bards in the region 'such as they are at present in these parts, & such as they were within the memory of my informers father (who is an aged man of ninetie seaven years)'. It is the most important ethnographic description of itinerant bards to survive in Scotland (Gordon: 22-23; Shaw: 142-43):

'These bards in former times used to travel in companies, sometimes 40, 50, 60 persons between men, wives & childrene and they were thus ranked, the first were termed philies, i.e. poets, & they were divided thus-some made panagyrics onlie, others made onlie satyrs... The whole caball was called Chlearheanachi...& dureing there abod (which would sometimes be 2 or 3 moneths) one or two of them came in each night to the famalie to makegood companieby telling stories makeing rhymes and such drolleries....

There were likewise 9 or 10 sometimes 11 or 12 women to travel together, who as they came to anie house two & two together sang one of the songs these philies had made, they had ordinarlie a violer with them who played on his fidle as they sang, when they had done singing, then they danced, these were named avranich, i.e., singers.'

The Ballads of the Finn Cycle

The most famous of Gaelic epics, and one that had a central role in providing the very groundwork for folklore collecting in Scotland, is the Finn Cycle. It is a cycle in the usual sense that it forms a continuous circle of linked narratives centred around the exploits of Fionn Mac Cumhail and his warrior band the Féinn of Fianna. Its influence is powerful enough that I have chosen to treat it here apart from all other genres, examining its antecedents, its wide cultural importance, and the impetus it has provided to collecting and dissemination of oral poetry.

The origins of the cycle are in Ireland, where it gained in importance, as we have seen, from around the 12th century, and rapidly became pan-Gaelic to the extent that it would be right to say that at one time or another it was known and revered in every Gaelic-speaking area of Scotland. Part of its value was tied to its undoubted emblematic status – what we nowadays like to interpret in terms of concepts of ‘identity’ (see below). Interspersed in the lengthy, often ornate narratives, are chanted poems (*duain*). The poems, usually referred to as ‘ballads’, are combined with the prose narratives in a literary device (*prosimetrum*) inherited from the Early Irish hero-tales, and on comparative evidence ultimately from remote Indo-European times. The ballads are in syllabic metre, distinct from the usual modern Gaelic stressed metres, and are chanted to airs that differ from those of any other genre of poetry. The earliest sources of these preserved in Scotland are from the Book of the Dean of Lismore which was compiled in Perthshire in the southern Highlands around 1500. Despite the positions taken by literary and historical detractors, not all of the Scottish material is derivative: there are items here and in more recent

oral sources that indicate innovations arising in Scotland and appear nowhere in Ireland.

The Beginnings of Fieldwork and Macpherson's Ossian

The initial fieldwork collections of Gaelic heroic ballads and other materials were compiled from the beginning in the 18th century. Collectors active from this time (and indeed from as late as the 20th century) were often Highland clergymen. The Rev James McLagan's (1728-1805) large collection survives in manuscript; Rev Donald MacNicol (1735-1802) also amassed large amounts of heroic ballad material (some now lost) in addition to transcribing and publishing the works of his contemporary, the poet Duncan Ban MacIntyre; and the extensive song collections by Ranald MacDonald of Eigg (1776) and of John Gillies of Perth (fl. 1780) appeared in print. Printed collections served as an effective complement to the vast store of anonymous poetic tradition passed down and circulated among the common people during this time, as well as to the output of their contemporary bards.

Foremost of his generation in drawing attention to Highland oral traditions was the Badenoch man James Macpherson (1736-96), who toured the Highlands collecting epic ballads. The results, *Fingal* (1761) and *Fragments* (1760), produced under the guidance of one of Edinburgh's leading literati, were to become a long-term literary sensation throughout Europe. Macpherson had set his sights high, attempting to present his public with a major, newly discovered epic, and did not avail himself to what we would regard today as due concern for scholarly accuracy. The resulting controversy continued well into the

following century, drawing in such luminaries as David Hume and Samuel Johnson, together with a number of Highland field collectors.



James Macpherson 1736-96

The fruits of a far-ranging, and for its time balanced investigation of the authenticity of Macpherson's works were made public in the Highland Society's *Report on the Poems of Ossian* of 1805. From our vantage point some two centuries later, the information it contains concerning social contexts, transmission, repertoire, etc. of oral poetry from this period are at least of equal interest to what it reveals regarding Macpherson himself. In a letter to dated 1763 and printed in the *Report*, the Rev Alexander Pope, minister of Reay in the northern mainland district of Caithness and an early gatherer of heroic ballads in the Highlands, makes clear his stance regarding James Macpherson and the Ossian controversy: that evidence of the ballads from oral sources in Caithness and further west is so abundant as 'to convince people of candour: so that, if the literati in England will not be persuaded, they must wait till they see Ossian and his heroes in another world'. Pope then describes how, twenty-four years previously in 1739, he along with

another gentleman who lived on Lord Reay's estate, 'entered into a project of collecting these old poems. We admired the purity of their style ... and some of the sentiments were noble and sublime: to this end we informed ourselves as to those old people that could repeat parts of them, and got their name, but we could not, from the best information, learn that there was any manuscript of them in this part of the kingdom.'

Although work of James Macpherson had certainly reached Pope earlier and aroused his curiosity, he was not able to examine the works until the summer of 1763. He names three of Macpherson's poems that correspond to those collected or heard by him, and goes on to urge that Hugh Blair, Macpherson's literary mentor in Edinburgh, use his contacts, presumably among the literati, to contribute a sum of £10 toward a collecting project to ensure that 'these venerable productions would be preserved.' Pope continues that much as he would have liked to carry out such a project, his gout prevented him from doing so, but that the traditions still locally extant 'would make a larger volume than the *Temora*'. That the state of oral tradition is an issue of concern for Pope is clear from what follows, where he ascribes it in part to the antipathy of some of the clergy toward the materials and the adverse effect they (the clergy) were having on the process of transmission between generations. Pope's reply to sceptics, echoed by other Highland collectors, was that Ossianic ballads were demonstrably current among reciters in perfectly ordinary Highland locales before Macpherson's publications appeared, or indeed before he was born.

Pope's letter provides useful ethnographic information. He notes that heroic ballads were associated with particular airs, distinct from those attached to other song genres, which he surmises were an important factor in their oral retention as well as providing pleasure to the listener. He notes the local Gaelic term for them – *duan* (a term still in use in some

Gaelic-speaking districts) and places them on an artistic par with classical poetry. Following is an account, both amusing and revealing, of an incident where an elderly and dignified parishioner with the surname of Campbell, when asked to recite the *Duan Dearmot* 'The Lay of Diarmaid', a ballad historically (or pseudo-historically) associated with his clan, reverently removed his bonnet whenever he did so. Pope, having first presented the reciter with a bottle of ale, replaced the old man's bonnet, which the old man promptly removed again. 'At last he was like to swear most horribly that he would sing none, unless I allowed him to be uncovered; I gave him his freedom and he sung with great spirit. I asked him the reason; he told me it was out of regard for the memory of that hero ... (and) he thought it well became them who descended from him to honour his memory' (MacKenzie: 52-55).

Macpherson's *Fingal* and the works that followed, for all the excitement and controversy they caused, can hardly be said to have emerged into a cultural vacuum, and it is worth taking a step back from the collectors and the materials in order to take a brief look at the larger contexts of social, cultural, intellectual and political history and how they applied to the collecting of Gaelic oral tradition in Scotland. The interest that appeared in England of the 17th century in the regional past, embracing archaeology, early history, linguistic history and literature, soon began to be felt in neighbouring regions of the British Isles. As early as the last decade of the that century questions of ethnology are already beginning to play a part in this process; John Aubrey's letter of 1692 to Professor James Garden inquired not only after stone circles, a major interest of his, but also, judging from Garden's replies, Highland funeral customs and the bardic orders described above (Gordon: *passim*). Two years later Aubrey conversed with the Irish-born philosopher John Toland seeking

information on druids as well as stone circles. Needless to say, the works of the Welsh polymath Edward Lhuyd in his *Archaeologia Britannica* with its pioneering comparisons of indigenous languages, as well as his scientific expeditions throughout Britain, were also an expression in a burgeoning general scholarly interest. The political arena was there as well. As Derick Thomson notes, the Union of 1707 had its cultural effects, leading, in his words, to ‘a tendency to justify the ways of Scotland to England, and perhaps, south of the border, a tendency to repress, and put in his place, the smaller, more barbaric partner’ (Thomson, 1958: 172). If we accept this dialogue between cultures as a framework for what occurred in the course of the Ossian controversy and long after, it serves to explain much of the orientation that lies behind written statements by Highland collectors of the late 18th-early 19th centuries and their presentation of the gathered materials. Remaining with politics for the moment, for our present purposes we can regard the aftermath of Jacobitism and the unsuccessful Scottish uprising of 1745 as two-pronged. The first was the direct military and cultural suppression through the often cited proscription in the Highlands of weapons and Highland dress outside of the army. The second and subsequent part, once the political and military threats were safely dealt with, had to do with cultural politics: the rehabilitation of Highland cultural symbols, beginning with dress and extending ultimately to literature and the performing arts. Establishing a pattern that was to be replicated in its own way later on in North America, and still continues (albeit in increasingly bizarre forms), the new, safer environment permitted and encouraged the sentimentalisation of Jacobitism, and by extension, gave rise to a romantic view of the Highlands replete with heroes and emotionally moving landscapes. Linked closely with such emerging perceptions were literary concepts current in Europe from the first half of the 18th century –

most obviously the concept and pursuit of the *sublime* – that were introduced into Scotland by resident intellectuals such as Macpherson’s Edinburgh mentor Hugh Blair. Such ideas took little time in reaching students in other Scottish universities such as Aberdeen, and soon appeared in their writings on Gaelic ballads. Intellectual history also cannot be ignored. Ideas concerning the evolution of society led to an interest in ‘primitive’ cultures at a time when the opening up of contact with exotic cultures was about to lay the groundwork for the 19th century disciplines of anthropology and comparative philology. ‘Primitive’ cultures were conceived of as being possessed of positive attributes that has been lost among their more highly evolved counterparts, and in a time of massive social transformation attempting to recover these through study, or even contact, was deemed desirable. In this changing society the ‘Highlander’, read Gael, was no longer the potential ‘space invader’ of previous centuries; he was transformed, in one scholar’s words, into a far more user-friendly ‘contemporary ancestor’, linked to an earlier, better age graced by natural, more attractive virtues – a kind of alternative, northern Arcadia. We should add to this the concept of nationalism: that of a distinct Scottish identity realised and expressed in terms of romanticism and posing no substantial threat to England or the Union. Given this framework, the Highlands were, I think, uniquely placed, being exotic but in part, at least, accessible to travellers and investigators of the time (Devine: Ch. 11)

What can we conclude about the influence of Macpherson’s *Ossian* on the collecting of Gaelic oral folklore in the Highlands? Without doubt it gave rise to a greater concern with good practice in the field, for example the careful noting of oral sources, and provided valuable ethnographic descriptions of performing events that would otherwise have been lost.

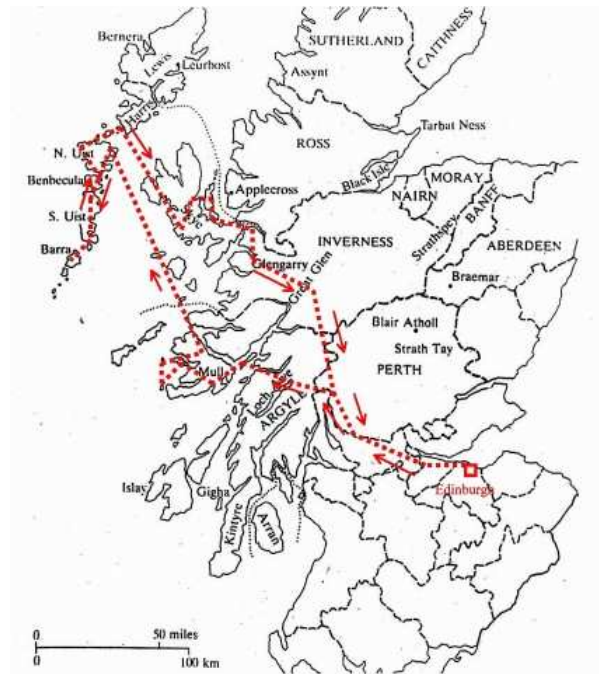
Furthermore, it gave voice to a concern among learned Gaels at the time regarding the rapid decline of the Gaelic world and the disappearance of the oral traditions central to the culture. In this connection it has been noted that collectors were active mainly on the peripheries of the Gàidhealtachd (initially Perthshire, Argyll, Caithness), following the retreat of the language and allied traditions to the Western Isles a century later (see Thomson 1983: 294). Beyond this, it seems to me that the most obvious assertion we can make is that the Ossian controversy did provide some stimulus to collecting by adding an international literary dimension that served to focus and intensify issues that were already part of the 18th century Highland scene.

An Active Legacy: Building on the Foundations

Fieldwork and the publishing of collections continued into the 19th century, and one of the most interesting collectors from the beginning of this period was a musician of relatively humble origins by the name of Alexander Campbell (1764-1824). Campbell was born in the southern Highlands, and while a music teacher in Edinburgh became acquainted with Sir Walter Scott. Despite recurring and unfulfilled literary ambitions that time and again proved to be a distraction, he was a born ethnologist; in 1815 with the sponsorship of the Royal Highland Society of Scotland he undertook an ambitious collecting journey throughout the Highlands for the purpose of raising the profile of Scotland's 'national music'. The results were a song collection, *Albyn's Anthology* (published 1816), and of no less importance, a day-by-day account (*A Slight Sketch of a Journey made through parts of the Highlands and Hebrides*) of the 1200 mile journey made on foot and by boat to some of the remotest corners of Gaeldom. The *Sketch* contains much of interest in its detailed descriptions

of the circumstances of song notation, singers, their communities, and local song collectors.

Alexander Campbell's Journey through the Highlands, 1815.



Through his Highland Society connections, Campbell was extended hospitality by the local minor aristocracy throughout the Highlands. While staying with MacDonald of Staffa, himself a song collector of note, Campbell mentions the lengths he went to (doubtless in the wake of the Ossian controversy) in authenticating his fieldwork sources:

16th August, the morning of which was spent in getting Staffa's attestation to each piece I had taken down from vocal recitation, a rule I have invariably followed when I could get either a magistrate or a clergyman to give the stamp of authority to everything connected with what I am intrusted to collect; and I have rigidly adhered to this rule in order to preclude the possibility of trick or forgery.

Having endured the often stormy passage from Mull to the Outer Isles, he records his meeting with his Uist guide, Roderick MacQueen (remembered in local tradition as a remarkable singer and reciter), who was a repository for a wealth of ballads from the Finn Cycle:

28th August, Roderick MacQueen, grass-keeper in Carnish, was in waiting. And immediately after breakfast this person began to recite, and occasionally sing, the poems usually ascribed to Ossian. During three consecutive days (with little intermission) I was employed in writing down certain portions of the words adapted to the melodies of those *laoidhean*, or hymns, from the mouth of Roderick MacQueen, who far surpasses any person that I have hither to met with in this species of acquirement; his retention and reminiscence are remarkably great. His musical ear is pretty good, and I have reason to believe that the melodies which he chants these ancient songs are genuine, and I have pricked them down carefully... While here I witnessed for the first time persons singing at the same time they danced, and this is called dancing to *port-à-beul*¹ being succeedaneous contrivance to supply the want of a musical instrument. This affect is droll enough, and gives an idea of what one might conceive to be customary among tribes but little removed from a state of nature. What renders this illusion more probable is the mode in which these merry islanders perform the double exercise of singing and dancing: thus the men and women sing a bar of the time alternately by which they preserve the respiration free

¹ A variety of vocal dance music that survives among Gaelic speakers to this day.

and the same time observe the accent and rhythms quite accurately. The effect is animating, and having words correspondent to the character of the measure, there seems to be a three-fold species of gratification arising from the union of song and dance – rude, it is confessed – but such as pleases the vulgar; and not displeasing to one who feels disposed to join in rustic pleasures or innocent amusement.

Campbell's next port of call after Uist was to the north in the Isle of Harris:

24th August

Soon after my arrival, the Misses McLeod of Rodal came on a visit to their relation Mrs Campbell of Strond, in whose house I now was, and felt myself perfectly at home. My chief object in coming to Harris was to wait upon the identical ladies, the visitants named above, and thus I was happily anticipated in my original intention. I had heard much of their possessing a rich fund of Gaelic poetry and music, in consequence of which I was eager to ascertain, by personal interview, the truth of the report; and I was amply rewarded for a journey on foot from the furthest point of South Uist to the extremity of North Uist, a distance of at least four score miles.

I was now in the midst of a group of seven ladies who were all excellent singers; and one of them, namely Mrs Doctor McLeod, a performer on the pianoforte. I soon put the instrument (which was a good London made one) in tune, and commenced my labours. The task was easy, and very gracious, for their voices were good; whatever they sang was in perfect intonation, and they had nothing vulgar in their manner of singing. Nay, on the contrary, they displayed a considerable degree of taste in

execution, and occasionally pathos in their melodies and words of an elegiac cast. My gleanings at Killegray in Harris amount to eleven pieces of vocal music, most of which were quite new to me.

From the mid 19th century, extensive gathering of songs and other oral poetry was carried out by Rev John Grigorson Campbell of Tiree and John Francis Campbell, part of whose collection of Finn Cycle ballads still awaits study. Perhaps most remarkable from this period is the famous collection by Alexander Carmichael of oral religious poetry, published as *Carmina Gadelica* which contains many striking items such as the following:

SOLUS-IUIL NA SIORRUIDHEACHD

*DHE, thug mis a fois na h-oidhch an raoir
Chon solus aoibh an la an diugh,
Bi da mo thoir bho sholus ur an la an diugh,
Chon solus iul na siorruidheachd,
O ! bho sholus ur an la an diugh,
Gu solus iul na siorruidheachd.*

THE GUIDING LIGHT OF ETERNITY

O God, who broughtst me from the rest of last night
Unto the joyous light of this day,
Be Thou bringing me from the new light of this day
Unto the guiding light of eternity.
Oh ! from the new light of this day
Unto the guiding light of eternity.

(Carmichael 1: 32-33)

Alexander Carmichael
1832-1912.



A further notable variety from oral tradition, and one distinctively associated with women in Scottish Gaeldom, is the repertoire of labour songs termed waulking songs, evolved to accompany the vigorous and monotonous chore of shrinking the heavy wool tweed cloth by hand. The wide distribution of waulking songs along the western part of the Highlands indicates their considerable age, and indeed we have an account from as early as the end of the seventeenth century, once more from the Hebridean traveller Martin Martin, where he related how an English visitor to North Uist in the Outer Isles:

‘happen'd to come into a House where he found onlv ten Women, and they were employ'd (as he suppos'd) in a strange manner, viz. their Arms and Legs were bare, being five on a side; and between them lay a Board, upon which they had laid a piece of Cloth, and were thicken'g of it with their Hands and Feet, and singing all the while. The English-man presently concluded it to be a little *Bedlam*, which he did not expect in so remote a Corner: and this he told to *Mr John Macklean*, who possesses the Island. *Mr. Macklean* answer'd, he never saw any mad People in those Islands: but this would not satisfy him, till they both went to the place where the women were at work; and then *Mr. Macklean*

having told him, that it was their common way of thickning
Cloth, he was convinc'd, tho surpriz'd at the manner of it.'
(Campbell and Collinson: 4-5)



Waulking in Uist c. 1900

The subject matter of the songs typically reflects the preoccupations of a society that existed over previous centuries, and still retained a strong hold on the life of the mind in the rural areas of the Highlands during the 19th century:

‘The subjects of the songs are usually the praise of great men, of the chiefs and their magnificence and hospitality; the hunt; love (if the lover is of noble origin, there is no shame in an illegitimate pregnancy); and laments for the dead ...

Similes are drawn directly from nature, and the language is pure, simple, and concrete, and often highly poetical, as might be expected from a people whose everyday life was permeated with an oral literature of poetry, song, and story, and with whom the professional poet-historians were held in high honour.’ (*op.cit.*: 18).

Waulking songs contain some of the most intense and powerful poetry produced by women in Scotland. One famous song is said to have been

composed toward the end of the 18th century by a woman in the Outer Hebrides upon being informed of the drowning of her sweetheart. It is accompanied by a short narrative:

It is told that when this woman was going to be buried, she was to be buried on the far side of Diadair Sound; that a tempest came upon the crew, so that they had to put the coffin overboard; that the coffin went right against the tide and the wind, and that it sank at the very spot where her sweetheart had been drowned, whereupon peace and calm came upon the sea, and the men, who were in great danger of losing their lives, were saved.

'S bochd an nochd na bheil air m'aire,

Meud na sìne, fuachd na gaillinn

Meud na sìne, fuachd na gaillinn

Dh'fhuadaicheadh na fir o'n charraig,

Dh'fhuadaicheadh na fir o'n charraig,

Chuireadh iad a'bhòid dha'n aondeoin ...

Gura mise th'air mo léireadh

Cha n-e bàs a'chruidh 'sa Chéitein,

No tainead mo bhuaile spréidhe,

Ach a fhlichead 's a tha do léine,

'S tu bhith 'm bàrr nan tonn ag éirigh

Mucan Mara bhith 'gad reubadh,

Bhith 'gad ghearradh as a chéile...

Tonight sad thoughts my mind are filling,
The strength of the storm, the cold of th' tempest

The strength of th' storm, the cold of th' tempest
That drove the men from the shore's shelter,

That drove the men from the shore's shelter,
Sent them on a voyage unwilling...

Truly I am sore tormented,

Not by death of stock in springtime,

Nor by th' fewness of my cattle,

But by thy clothing's dampness,
And that thou art on wavetop floating
While sea monsters rend thy body,
And are tearing thee asunder...

(Campbell & Collinson: 44-48)

Orally composed poetry thus on occasion achieved a grand scale, with a few favoured songs spreading far beyond their original geographical confines. Individual bards of exceptional ability also became widely recognised, often assisted through a moderate form of patronage from a local member of the landed gentry. Among the most widely admired is

Duncan MacIntyre (1724-1812), whose nature poetry was passed on with reverence among the common people. Here he begins his celebration of the mountain Beinn Dòbhrain, where he spent much of his youth hunting deer. The poem follows the traditional rhythmic changes of pipe tune variations:

*An t-urram tha gach beinn
Aig Beinn Dòbhrain;
De na chunnaic mi fon ghréin,
'S i bu bhòidhche leam:
Munadh fada réid,
Cuilidh 'm faighte féidh,
Soillearachd an t-sléibh
Bha mi sònrachadh;
Doireachan gach geug,
Coill' anns am bi feur...*

Precedence over every ben [mountain]
has Ben Dobhrain;
Of all I have seen beneath the sun,
I deemed her loveliest:
a long, unbroken moor,
covert where deer are found;
the brightness of the slope
I noted specially;
coppices of boughs,
woodland where grass grows ...
(MacLeod: 196-7)

On a more ordinary level, for at least the past 200 years virtually every Highland settlement has been known to have its own community ('village') bard, whose task it has been to provide an internal oral record of the life of the people. This 'popular culture' in the form of a still living tradition portrays local personalities and events, frequently through a 'high context' use of language and allusion, in order to give voice and artistic form to 'what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed'. If such oral compositions over the past two centuries can be identified under a brief heading, it would be 'nature and society', embracing a wide social spectrum that includes panegyric, humour, love, politics, war, satire (directed at rats as well as people), land tenure and laments. Throughout the past century the verse has remained strongly topical: the grounding of a ship containing a large cargo of whisky off the Outer Hebrides; the introduction of AI (artificial insemination) by Scottish agriculture to small island communities; the 'recovery' of the Stone of Destiny (symbolic of Scottish sovereignty) from Westminster Abbey in 1950.

20th Century Collecting And Dissemination

In the early 20th century the gathering and publication of Gaelic song by Marjory Kennedy-Fraser, albeit in the form of art versions, became a major influence on the perceptions of Gaelic oral song/verse tradition. Further important fieldwork, this time based directly on field recordings made with the best technology available at the time, was carried out in Uist and Barra by John Lorne Campbell of Canna, and made accessible in his numerous publications. The founding of the School of Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh in 1951 led to the hiring of a

number of professional field collectors, among them Calum Maclean, who, though primarily concerned with traditional narrative, left behind an irreplaceable legacy of over 400 song recordings from the 1940s-50s. These are but a small part of the song materials held and catalogued in the School Archive, the primary national folklore resource in Scotland. Numerous collections of the works of regional bards have continued to appear in print, and members of a community thus gifted still hold a position of respect, sometimes tempered with caution lest a satire result. Over recent decades significant studies have emerged on traditional composition processes among active contemporary bards and the functions of song/poetry in the localities (J. Macdonald; McKean)

In a cultural environment where Gaelic poetry has been moving in the direction of written composition, technology has begun to play a positive role in oral transmission. Increased availability of items from community-based song traditions has encouraged performers to introduce greater depth and breadth to their repertoires. *Tobar an Dualchais* ('The Well of Tradition')/*Kist o' Riches* is a major national project now underway to make the extensive recorded collections of Gaelic (and Scots) oral traditions accessible to users online within the next few years. This and other media will ensure the continuation in Western Europe of an ancient but living art form that is the legacy of all Gaelic communities, and indeed of an entire country.

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