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Cheape, Hugh

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HEBRIDEAN FOLKSONGS

I

HEBRIDEAN FOLKSONGS

VOLUME I

A Collection of Waulking Songs

by

DONALD MACCORMICK
in Kilphedir in South Uist
in the year 1893

Completed and edited by

J. L. CAMPBELL

Some songs translated by
Fr Allan McDonald

Tunes transcribed and annotated by
Francis Collinson



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INTRODUCTION

Hò ro hù ò, hò ill eò
Hebridean Folksongs and the Authenticity of the Òran Luaidh or
Waulking Song Tradition

The three remarkable volumes of *Hebridean Folksongs* published between 1969 and 1981 by Oxford University Press represent the culmination of approximately forty years of applied scholarship in Scottish Gaelic and the outcome of a remarkably effective collaboration between John Lorne Campbell, the instigator of the project, and Francis Collinson, founding staff-member of the School of Scottish Studies from its establishment in 1951 and leading musicologist of the Scottish tradition.

The *Hebridean Folksongs* are a classic product of twentieth-century research and interdisciplinary collaboration, offering a definitive study of a total of 135 songs with more than one version of some of them and a total of over 5,000 lines of Gaelic verse. These ‘folksongs’ are a very important part of the Scottish Gaelic song tradition and are described as *òrain luaidh* and conventionally in English as ‘waulking songs’. ‘Waulking’ was the process of finishing and shrinking hand-woven cloth by pounding it, in a wet state, onto a long wooden board of planks – the *cliath*. The work was carried out by a group of women lined up on each side of the board. Sitting at the board, they would grasp the web of cloth, pound it down and shift it on to their neighbour in a clockwise (or sunwise) direction. Some older descriptions of the waulking state that the cloth was trampled and pounded by the feet.¹ This task had gone out of use by the mid twentieth century as the handloom weaving of tweed had ceased, thus threatening the survival of the accompanying song tradition itself. Continuing interest in these Gaelic songs and the recording of them, as in the Campbell and Collinson collection, has ensured their survival although performance today (as ‘art songs’) is in very different contexts than previously.

Singing to accompany work – to ease the burden – has probably been a universal practice and custom. In the Gaelic world (as elsewhere), singing extended to a range of other work tasks and communal activities. Comparable song-types with choral refrain are on record and remembered as rowing songs, songs for reaping with the sickle and grinding grain with the quern, and songs for milking the cow and churning the milk for butter. Such communal activities accompanied by song would often turn into social events in the life of a community. The songs for fulling homemade cloth were in a very special category of Scottish Gaelic songs, of single line or couplet structure with a refrain of words or vocables such as, for example, ‘*Cò sheinneas an fhìdeag airgid / Hò ro hù ò, hò ill eò*’ (Vol. III, page 224). At least one woman, acknowledged as an experienced singer in the community, would lead the singing while the rest took up the refrain or chorus. Songs with a refrain of spoken syllables often seem to be associated with labour

¹ Morag MacLeod, ‘Foot-Waulking – Luaidh-Chas’, in Katherine Campbell, William Lamb, Neil Martin, Gary West (eds), *A Guid Hairst’: Collecting and Archiving Scottish Tradition. Essays in Honour of Dr Margaret A Mackay*. Maastricht: Shaker Verlag 2013, 45–62.

where rhythm and metre are chosen to match physical action, and the waulking songs are sung to a rhythm that picks up the beating of the cloth on the board. The *òrain luaidh* are largely assumed to be the compositions of women and are for the most part anonymous as we have them. Full expression of the song requires choral support to the solo singer, and such a body of song with choral participation has existed for an undefinable period in Gaelic society without necessarily all originating as work songs; here there may have been a link with a complex of dance and song common throughout Europe in the medieval period.² As principally in the voice of women as the tradition has come down to us, the work songs' verbal and melodic structure, with phrases in alternating pattern between solo and chorus, invariably achieves an extraordinary and impressive unity and intensity.

The first volume of *Hebridean Folksongs* is built on a collection of waulking songs made by Donald MacCormick of Kilphedir, South Uist, in 1893, to which musical scores have been added by the editors. Significantly, the editors remind us in the Foreword that '[h]itherto, no book has been entirely devoted to the subject of waulking songs'.³ Donald MacCormick was a schools attendance officer in Uist in the 1890s. John Lorne Campbell had learnt of his collecting of oral tradition from the notebooks of Fr Allan McDonald of Eriskay (1859–1905) whose folklore collections Campbell was then trying to recover and reassemble. Fr Allan had written about (and evidently used) a manuscript of songs transcribed by Donald MacCormick in the context of a proposal in 1902 to publish a book devoted to waulking songs. John Lorne Campbell, with the help of Francis Collinson, was then able to put versions of airs to most of Donald MacCormick's forty transcribed songs from their own recording work in South Uist, Benbecula, Barra and Eriskay between the late 1930s and the early 1960s. The scope of the MacCormick collection within South Uist and of John Lorne Campbell's recording work in the southern Outer Isles defined the final form of the work as 'Hebridean Folksongs from South Uist and Barra'. A review commented that the northern Outer Isles and Skye might usefully have been included, together with a gathering of remnants from Mull and other areas. The editors countered that 'our object in publishing the material in these volumes is to give a comprehensive description of the waulking itself and to preserve the best of the old waulking songs recoverable in *South Uist and Barra* [editors' italics] and adjacent smaller islands'.⁴

For the purposes of the earlier project to publish waulking songs, Fr Allan had made translations of some of Donald MacCormick's transcriptions, and translation of the texts was completed in Fr Allan's own style. By following Fr Allan's initiative, John Lorne Campbell was honouring Fr Allan's earlier endeavours and seeking to reinstate

2 John MacInnes, 'Òrain Luaidh and Other Work Songs', in John Beech, Owen Hand, Fiona MacDonald, Mark Mulhearn and Jeremy Weston (eds), *Oral Literature and Performance Culture*, Scottish Life and Society 10. A Compendium of Scottish Ethnology. Edinburgh: John Donald 2007, 412–426.

3 We should exclude from this comment the collection of waulking songs, though with texts only, made in South Uist from 1942 by K C Craig, *Òrain Luaidh Mairi nighean Alasdair*. Glasgow: Alasdair Matheson & Co 1949.

4 [Alan Bruford], Review of *Hebridean Folksongs II*, *Tocher* No. 27 (1977), 188; John Lorne Campbell and Francis Collinson, 'To the editor of *Tocher*', *Tocher* No. 28 (1978), 257; see also review by Derick Thomson in *Glasgow Herald*, 24 July 1969, on including other islands.

him as a leading scholar of Scottish Gaelic, as part of his own efforts to recover what he could of Fr Allan's 'lost' folklore research papers. A clearly outdated and 'Victorian' style for the translations drew the attention of reviewers when published; an example of reticence was cited in the stately line 'Babe unborn ere groom betrothed me' for *Rinn mi 'n diolanas ro 'n phòsadh* (Vol. I, page 72), whose direct meaning might be better rendered as 'I committed fornication before marriage'.⁵ Literal translation achieves more accurate communication of the meaning of the songs and is preferred. Such inaccuracies were corrected in a glossarial index (Vol. I, pages 351–372). More literal and non-rhyming translations followed in the subsequent volumes.

The second and third volumes of *Hebridean Folksongs* with 48 and 47 songs respectively comprise the fruits of John Lorne Campbell's and Francis Collinson's own recording and research work. They follow the pattern of the first volume with the texts of songs, with translations and with musical transcriptions. The song texts are as true representations of the performance of the traditional singer as can be offered without sound but in a durable medium, and every detail of the singers' performances is noted. As the editorial comment assures us, the process of fieldwork recording was carried out under conditions ensuring the highest possible degree of authenticity. Following the rigorous standards adopted, the editors include very full notes on verbal and musical aspects of the songs, for example, on the texts of the most challenging (and older?) songs and on the various scales found in the songs. Francis Collinson's detailed survey of pitch structures draws in a range of examples of scales which are largely modal of the gapped pentatonic or hexatonic scale type. An important chapter is devoted to further consideration of the refrain vocables and how they might be designed to carry an indication of rhythm and stress pattern, and the extent to which refrains have been a mnemonic device. Additional critical apparatus includes sections on motifs and formulas of older waulking songs and their significance. These insights are valuable when the formulaic nature of the songs may increase the incidence of recurring motifs. The social and cultural context of the songs is explored through interpretation of the textual references which figuratively, and arguably literally, present copious insights into the culture of earlier ages and the Gaelic world of the medieval and early modern periods. Importantly, John Lorne Campbell suggests that with these songs we enter into the society of the Highlands and Islands following the forfeiture of the Lordship of the Isles in the late fifteenth century. Since the publication of *Hebridean Folksongs*, a 'system' of rhetoric revealed in the song texts and characterised as 'the panegyric code' has been the focus of extensive research and analysis.⁶

In discussing the compelling question of the origins of the *òrain luaidh*, John Lorne Campbell puts forward a theory of improvisation, that the majority of the waulking songs were 'extemporized by women at the waulking board, using freely passages and

5 Alison A McLaren, *Review of Hebridean Folksongs I*, *Scottish Gaelic Studies* Vol. XII Pt 1 (1971), 123.

6 See John MacInnes, 'The Panegyric Code in Gaelic Poetry and its Historical Background', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* Vol. 50 (1976–1978), 435–498; this seminal essay has been reprinted in Michael Newton (ed.), *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes*. Edinburgh: Birlinn 2006, 265–319; see also Ronald Black (ed.), *An Lasair: Anthology of 18th Century Scottish Gaelic Verse*. Edinburgh: Birlinn 2001, 525–527.

conceptions from an older literature' (Vol. I, page 22). In support of this theory, he maintains that 'this process of extemporisation and not the omission of passages is sufficient to account for the abrupt changes of subject that occur in the songs as we find them' (Vol. I, page 19), and that the same breaks have been occurring in the same songs in the Nova Scotia Gaelic community. Critique might suggest that this could be seen as characterising a rigidity of text as opposed to flexibility.⁷ The work process was not strictly time-limited and there would be a plausible need to prolong the song to sustain the rhythm of the work. As one review has commented:

The refrain patterns obviously work to this end already, stretching the minimum of text over the maximum of time; similarly, when the end of one text was reached it would have been an obvious matter simply to start in on another in the same metre. The fact that the two texts might deal with entirely different subjects would make no difference to the women, whose only concern would be to get the job done – not to provide an aesthetically satisfying experience for the casual listener. For the twentieth-century analyst, accustomed to textual integrity, the lack of such integrity in the waulking songs is a problem; for the waulking-women it was no such thing.⁸

Such a pragmatic view should not lose sight of the aesthetic and musical resources or senses of individual singers, or of the playful and competitive dimensions of the *òrain luaidh* tradition, and the reviewer admitted that the notion of improvisation should not be entirely abandoned. A process of improvisation is often mentioned and can be exemplified in the words of Mrs Mary Murray, Uig, Lewis, recorded by the School of Scottish Studies about 1967:

'We made up our own songs. One group would tease someone about a boy . . . They worked that way and teased each other about different men. It could be an old man, and it was awfully good to tease about an old man, and we would have a good laugh.'⁹

If a song was extemporised at the waulking board, how was it remembered at the moment of composition and after only one rendering? John Lorne Campbell extended his hypothesis to suggest that many of these songs were first 'improvised under semi-trance conditions. This accounts not only for their sectional structure and their frequent use of formulaic passages, but also for their spontaneity and their complete lack of self-consciousness. They are not to be compared with literary productions, but with dreams' (Vol. III, pages 6–8). This did not find favour with reviewers. Semi-trance conditions might work against improvisation and recall, and clearly the *òrain luaidh* offer opportunities for a great deal of further research. In terms of a viable and lively

7 McLaren, *Review of Hebridean Folksongs I*, 122.

8 Virginia Blankenhorn, *Review of Hebridean Folksongs III, Celtica* Vol. XV (1983), 182–183.

9 MacLeod, 'Foot-Waulking – Luaidh-Chas', 55.

tradition, it is worth restating that up to early modern times some people's memories were phenomenal and there is the added question of the vocable refrains being a means of identifying and recalling songs.¹⁰

John Lorne Campbell (1906–1996) himself was one of the foremost scholars and fieldworkers of the twentieth century in Celtic and Scottish Gaelic Studies. He dedicated his career to the recording, transmission and publication of the Gaelic song, literary and linguistic record of Scotland, and had extended this work to Cape Breton, Nova Scotia and the North American Gàidhealtachd. He was the author or editor of more than two dozen books of seminal importance for Gaelic literature and history, and of a long list of scholarly articles in the learned journals of his disciplines. Beyond this extensive study of the waulking song tradition, his legacy has been a seminal contribution to the study of the literature, folklore and history of the Hebrides and demonstration of the extraordinary value of primary sources for Gaelic and of the richness of traditional colloquial speech.

Francis (or 'Frank') Collinson (1898–1984) was the son of the organist of St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral in Edinburgh and studied music at Edinburgh University under Sir Donald Tovey, graduating in 1923 and going on to work in the London theatres in the 1920s and 1930s. He was an all-round musician and combined performer, composer, musical director and musicologist. His reputation in Scotland today rests on his later vocation as musicologist and folk music collector and his major work of synthesis, *The Traditional and National Music of Scotland* (1966). His work involved the study and transcription, as well as the collection, of traditional song in both Gaelic and Scots, and the accuracy and detail of his work led on to a collaboration with the equally meticulous scholar, John Lorne Campbell of Canna, on the collection *Hebridean Folksongs*. When the National Library of Scotland proposed an exhibition on John Lorne Campbell and his wife, Margaret Fay Shaw, in 1983, the couple insisted that the career and output of Frank Collinson be included in the exhibition alongside their own.

John Lorne Campbell's interest in Scottish Gaelic developed in his late teens at his family home in Argyll. He described being drawn to listening to four lads from the islands speaking fluent Gaelic at the Oban Games in 1925, and he decided that he must learn the language. Between 1926 and 1929 he studied Natural Science and Agriculture at St John's College, Oxford, and, while at Oxford, in his own words, he 'began the serious spare time study of Gaelic' with Professor John Fraser of Jesus College, attending his Celtic Studies classes on an informal basis from 1928. Professor Fraser (1882–1945) had moved from Aberdeen University to the Chair in Oxford in 1922. Apart from imparting the foundations of the language, he encouraged John Lorne Campbell in a research study that was to be published in 1933 as *Highland Songs of the Forty-Five*, an anthology of eighteenth-century Gaelic poetry and considered as a model of editorial practice. Under Professor Fraser's guidance, John Lorne Campbell described how he learnt the principles and discipline of editing which subsequently served him in such

10 Morag MacLeod, Review of *Hebridean Folksongs I–III*, *Scottish Studies* Vol. 26 (1982), 66–67.

good stead, and made him impatient of carelessness and low standards in such fields of scholarship.¹¹

After Oxford, John Lorne Campbell's career took a fresh and, for him personally, momentous turn. When his *Highland Songs of the Forty-Five* was in proof, he offered to make his information available to Compton Mackenzie, who was working on his biographical history of Prince Charlie. This offer was taken up and Compton Mackenzie, then living 'in exile' in Barra, invited Campbell to visit him and to make a study ofcrofting conditions and colloquial Gaelic. His arrival in the Outer Hebrides on 4 August 1933 was, as he described, a defining moment in his career and marked the beginning of a long and extraordinary life's work of recovery and transmission of the Gaelic song, literary and linguistic record.

Sharing in the literary coterie which Compton Mackenzie had then created at Northbay in Barra, John Lorne Campbell himself took lodgings with the exceptional John Macpherson, County Councillor and Postmaster, known to all as the 'Coddy'. With him and other Barra notables such as Annie and Calum Johnston and Neil Sinclair, the *Sgoilear Ruadh*, he began to explore this unusual world of the Hebrides, then still, as in his own words, 'like the old Highlands of the early 19th century'. Here he learnt the language to the necessarily high standard to record accurately Gaelic song and story, and working beyond the conventional institutional framework of the universities arguably (as he would maintain) gave his work a freshness of approach in the study of Gaelic literature and history as well as of language.

As a learner of the language, John Lorne Campbell followed an innovative path, the fruits of which are evident in *Hebridean Folksongs*. He maintained that the study of the popular culture of the British isles had rarely found a place in the universities, and that 'book Gaelic' – essentially the artificial language of the Gaelic Bible – had dominated teaching and study. He was often scathing about the attitude of Scottish academic institutions to the living language and the Gaelic oral tradition which he described as still one of the most interesting in Western Europe. As scholar of the language and recording in the field in Hebridean communities, he regarded himself as free of the constraints and 'straitjacket' of the universities and was enabled to concentrate on preserving a record of the spoken language and its richness of dialect. His emphasis on the vernacular of Hebridean communities is celebrated in the approximately 5,000 lines of verse in the three volumes of *Hebridean Folksongs*.

As lifelong student and recorder of Scottish Gaelic, John Lorne Campbell was the pioneer of the modern collecting of the Gaelic oral tradition using mechanical recorders, his career in this respect evolving in step with the evolution of effective and increasingly efficient recording machinery. Acquiring a clockwork Ediphone recorder in January 1937, he continued his fieldwork recording until 1968 and constantly upgraded his recorders in line with the technological advances in this field. He himself commented that the invention of disc, wire and tape recorders came just in time to record a generation born in the 1860s and 1870s. He laid up an extraordinary store of

11 See Hugh Cheape, "'Cuir siud sa' Ghàidhlig": toradh na h-obrach aig Fear Chanaigh', in Bob Chambers (ed.), *The Carrying Stream Flows On: Celebrating the Diamond Jubilee of the School of Scottish Studies*. The Islands Book Trust 2013, 95–117.

about 1,500 songs and 350 folktales. The quantity and extent of his recording of Gaelic song and story ultimately placed his collection as founding element of the *Tobar an Dualchais* digital archive and thereby achieved one of Campbell's fundamental aims of returning the heritage of song to the people.

Working from first principles in the exploration and evaluation of primary sources, one of John Lorne Campbell's other achievements was the pursuit and recovery of the dispersed and often 'lost' manuscripts of earlier generations of Gaelic scholars. Principal among these was his quest for the language and folklore collections of Fr Allan McDonald where he had noticed the reference to the waulking song collection by Donald MacCormick of Kilphedir. It was evident that Fr Allan and others had nursed a plan to publish a collection of waulking songs as early as 1902, a project even then long overdue because of the lack of material of this genre hitherto recorded or published. Because they were largely anonymous and perhaps lacked the magisterial dimensions defined in other areas of Gaelic literature, the waulking songs had been neglected by collectors and scholars. Ironically, what did emerge were the art-song collections of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser in her *Songs of the Hebrides Volumes I–III* (1909–1921) in which the skilled teacher and performer had adapted Gaelic songs for the concert platform.

Marjory Kennedy-Fraser had visited Eriskay in 1905, was delighted with the tunes she noted down and gave her first 'Hebridean recital' in Edinburgh in February 1907.¹² This was an instant success and persuaded her to continue collecting but to seek expert support for her handling of Scottish Gaelic, which she lacked. With the close collaboration of Rev. Kenneth MacLeod, she prepared her material for publication which in due course 'achieved for its compilers, Mrs Marjory Kennedy-Fraser and Rev Dr Kenneth MacLeod, substantial financial gain and ultimate notoriety'.¹³ This enterprise is an important and useful sub-text in *Hebridean Folksongs* where Campbell and Collinson undertake a critical inquiry into the origins of the Kennedy-Fraser songs. The centenary of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser's birth in 1857 had prompted John Lorne Campbell to reappraise *Songs of the Hebrides* and 'to set the record straight'.¹⁴ The impression had been given, in his view, that Kennedy-Fraser had rescued the last vestiges of Gaelic song and that, with the publication of her books, the store had been exhausted. This had acted, he maintained, to the detriment of recovering the authentic versions largely hidden behind the art-songs, and ignorance of the language had fed such assumptions. Campbell and Collinson include a critical list of songs showing correspondences between recorded *òrain luaidh* and items printed in *Songs of the*

12 Ethel Bassin, 'The Debt of Marjory Kennedy Fraser to Frances Tolmie', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* Vol. 39–40 (1942–1950), 334–349.

13 Blankenhorn, Review of *Hebridean Folksongs III*, 181; it would be fair to claim that her efforts were sincere. In her own words: 'These waulkings are invaluable functions for the preservation of traditional song, and we should do all we can to help their survival. Once they pass away completely, it may be very difficult to revive them' (Marjory Kennedy-Fraser, 'Waulking Songs', *An Gàidheal* Vol. 24 No. 6 (1929), 90).

14 John Lorne Campbell, 'Songs of the Hebrides', *Scots Magazine* January 1958, 307–314.

Hebrides (Vol. III, pages 324–336). *Hebridean Folksongs* is a meticulous return to the Gaelic voice and to ‘the real songs of the Hebrides’.

The collection of *Hebridean Folksongs* is still an exemplar of the highest standards of scholarly treatment and editorial methodology. While rigorous and with minute attention to detail, the work is still accessible; the writing is clear, unpretentious and in a spirit of humility aimed also at returning the tradition to the communities which had nurtured the songs and kept them alive. It is a firm basis for further research and also a sure guide, with so much authentic material, to the musical, literary and social significance of the waulking song tradition for those with little or no prior knowledge of this. This was endorsed by Professor Derick Thomson when he wrote: ‘There can be no doubt that these three volumes have put the study of Gaelic song on a new and secure footing, and have pointed the way to much future investigation.’¹⁵ Other review comments have included: ‘it must be an essential work of reference for anyone interested in Gaelic literature, music and culture in general’, and ‘the contributions made to Gaelic scholarship by the collaboration of Dr John Lorne Campbell and Francis Collinson in these three volumes is invaluable.’¹⁶ It is, in a word, a classic of Scottish Gaelic scholarship and must rank with J F Campbell’s *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* (1860–1862) and Alexander Carmichael’s *Carmina Gadelica* (1900–1971). The treatment of the texts of a total of 135 songs and variants from different performances; the transcriptions and meticulous editing of such authentic material; the music, notes, indexes and bibliographies; the lengthy discussions on song structures and themes; and the social background of the songs in both their literary and oral forms: all set a benchmark nationally and internationally by Campbell and Collinson which has not been surpassed. It is essential that we keep this collection in the hands of all students of Scottish Gaelic and of the general reader.

Hugh Cheape
Sabhal Mòr Ostaig
Ionad Nàiseanta Cànan is Cultar na Gàidhlig
Latha Bealltainn 2018

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¹⁵ Derick S. Thomson, Review of *Hebridean Folksongs III*, *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie*, Band 40 (1984), 301.

¹⁶ [Bruford], Review of *Hebridean Folksongs II*, 188; MacLeod, Review of *Hebridean Folksongs I–III*, 64.