

REVIEW

FROM THE FARTHEST HEBRIDES/BHO NA H-INNSE GALL AS IOMALLAICHE.

General Editor: Donald A. Fergusson, Gaelic Editor: Aonaghus Iain MacDhomhnuill; Music Editor: Jean F. Gillespie London. Toronto, Macmillan of Canada, 1978. xiv, 321 pp. \$19.95.

This is a very handsome volume—a big quarto, well bound, with (n.b.) the music and words done in fine calligraphy by Alf K. Ebsen of Toronto. The contents are a very good collection of 108 songs in Gaelic, with translations, from North Uist, the Outer Hebrides, Skye, as well as the mainland. The authors have their own expertise: Fergusson, from St. Mary's University, Halifax, is himself the editor of *Beyond the Hebrides* (privately published), a collection of Gaelic songs from Cape Breton. Angus Macdonald, who died before the volume was completed, was the last of a long line of oral historians (sennachies) of the Murdoch Macdonalds (dating back to the 1600s!). Jean Gillespie London, from Sydney (Australia), is an expert on Hebridean music. The title of the book was suggested by the location of Heisgeir, now completely deserted, but once the home of Macdonald's ancestors. The songs from this island are particularly old, and particularly fine.

There is, of course, no such thing as a perfect book. One of the annoyances of this one is its reticence as to

dates. We are told often enough that a song was composed by so-and-so, or on such-and-such an occasion, but even the approximate date (even the century!) is given but rarely. There is an index of first lines, but no general index (of names or subjects), which, in a book bristling with such, makes finding things rather difficult. There is one map, which does not however identify the Heisgeir group of islands; and besides a photo of a stained glass window (representing Somerled, first Lord of the Isles), there are no illustrations of people or places or activities.

In balance, however, it is at once beautiful and fascinating, and gives an excellent picture of life in an interesting corner of the world. The full flavour is caught, here, of the heroic, the everyday, the humdrum and the exciting, the old laments and the up-to-date satires, the inevitable songs in praise of one's girl or native isle, and the inevitable songs of parting.

Some of the material has links with Canada, since emigrants from Berneray and North Uist came to Cape Breton to settle in the Framboise - Grand River - Loch Lomond area during the early nineteenth century. Cape Breton had a good Gaelic newspaper, *Mac Talla*, which featured words of songs, e.g. *Tha Biodag Air Mac Thomais* ("The Son of Thomas Wears a Dirk"), by Gille na Ciotag (i.e. Archibald MacDonald, the one-armed bard of North Uist), set in this volume (p. 254) to a lively reel tune from that island. Another satire, *Oran nan Cat* ("Song of the Cats", p. 242), was written by Niall Ruadh Mor MacVicar, piper, fiddler, and bard, who emigrated from Vallay (N. Uist) to Cape Breton around 1831. Some

verses of his song are in J.G. MacKinnon's *Sketches of Old Sydney*. One of the "cats" of the song belongs to "Angus of the Thumbs", a notorious self-seeker who was instrumental in evicting many to Cape Breton and elsewhere; ironically, he ended up in C.B. himself, settling at Mira Gut in 1842. The song quotes the cat as threatening

*"Cuiridh mise le diurrais,
Ann an suilean a 'Bhaillidh
'S gu Ceap Breatunn gu'n
sgiursa mi,
Mar a thig sibh's mar thainig."*
("I shall put it in secret
In the eyes of the factor;
To Cape Breton I'll whip you
As has happened so often.")

(The version of this song given here is a bit longer than the text in Archibald Macdonald's *Uist Bards*, 1894, pp. 192-4.) *Garadh nan Ros* ("The Garden of Roses", p. 150) has been collected to a different tune in Cape Breton—see Creighton & MacLeod, *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia*, pp. 182-5, where it is called '*S ann airfeasgar Di-ciadaoin*', i.e. "It was on Wednesday Evening", from the beginning of the second stanza. Likewise, the "Song of the Fairy Woman" (*Oran na Bean Shith*, pp. 140-142) has been got in fragmentary form, to a different tune, in Sydney. (See Creighton/MacLeod, 122-3—22 lines, titled *Do Iain Og*, i.e. "To Young John", beginning like the 7th stanza of the Hebridean song, *Nach boidheach obair an Fhogharaidh*, " 'Tis pretty work in Autumn".)

On the other hand, there are connections with Australia, since a lot of Hebridean bards seem to have gone that way, taking songs with them, and also leaving them behind—as

witness *A Pheigi A Graidh* ("Peggy, My Love"), where the emigrant hopes to be reunited with his true love, his "fair-haired maid who was brought up in Uist so rare." The tune given (p. 173) is that of "Eilean Mo Chrìdh", and a beautiful melody it is. The author, incidentally, was, we're told, Hector Nicholson (Eachunn mac Ghilleasbuig Ruaidh), who was to marry his Peggy (the aunt of our book's Gaelic editor) in 1879. There's a date that pins it down, and I'm grateful!

Some of the material appears here for the first time; some is quite familiar—but even so, it is useful to have other versions of well-known things. For instance, "Ho ro, my nut-brown maiden", translated into fame by Professor Blackie, is here in a Uist version collected around 1850, given from a manuscript; this is its first appearance in print. The editor notes that he has versions collected in North Uist, Australia, several sections of Cape Breton, and Minnesota, where the collector noted that it is "well remembered everywhere along Lake Superior even where all other Gaelic songs are forgotten." The tune here has only one strain (as also in the versions in *A' Choisir-chiuil* and Moffat's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Highlands*). Similarly, the song in praise of Allan MacDonald of Clanranald (who died at Sheriffmuir) written by Iain mac Dhughail 'ic Lachlainn of Benbecula, is given here to one of the several tunes to which it can be sung, but not the "usual" one (*Tha Tigh'nn Fodham Eirigh*, pp. 106-8).

What Fergusson gives us here, then, is a wealth of old (and not so old) Gaelic song, that will be (to say the very least) useful for comparison

with other collections, and an interesting fund of lore for the browsing historian.

CONTENTS:

Songs of Heisgeir and the Sea/Heroic Songs of North Uist (with appendix of "Fragments of Ancient North Uist Gaelic Poems", the first of which, *Blar Banabharai*, is in Old Gaelic, and may in fact date very close to the battle of the title, which the Murdoch sennachies say was fought in 1423,)/Songs of Love/Songs of Labour (with appendices on Wool-Work, Flax-growing and Linen-weaving, and names of heavenly bodies)/Comic Songs and Satires/Songs of Raasay and Berneray/Miscellaneous.

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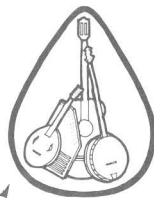
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