

# “A Song for Every Cow She Milked...”<sup>1</sup> Sharing the Work and Sharing the Voices in Gaeldom

(Plenary Address)

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## Abstract

Throughout the history of the Gael, both in Scotland and overseas, every aspect of life had its songs. Whether composed by the highly literate clan bard or by the non-literate farm servant, a huge wealth of songs was handed down from generation to generation. Traditional settings differed between the nobility and the ordinary folk, yet the songs were equally preserved in the clan chieftain’s great-hall and the humble thatched cottages that were the *taighean* ceilidh (visiting houses).

Events (such as weddings, births, feuds, battles, emigration, death) and memorable individuals were celebrated (or mourned) in song. Almost every kind of work had its songs, especially daily or seasonal labour done to a particular rhythm, including milking, churning, spinning, *waulking* (fulling) hand-woven cloth, reaping, or rowing. At the end of the day’s toil, songs in the *taigh* céilidh were the expectation and right of everyone, along with an opportunity to learn the tradition from established singers and custodians of centuries of knowledge.

This presentation discusses the range of songs and their function, from the most ancient “lay” through to modern compositions. Example of Gaelic songs from Scotland and Newfoundland (both recorded and sung by the presenter) will demonstrate points made through the paper.

## Introduction

“The end of world will come, but love and music will live forever” –so runs an old Scottish Gaelic proverb known to Highlanders at home and abroad: “*Thig crìoch air an t-saoghal ach mairidh gaol is ceòl.*” The Gaels may be fond of their proverbs, as they reflect the wisdom of generations, yet fonder of their songs, which express all aspects of life and human emotion, even when words fail. As I come from a singing family rooted in the traditions discussed in this paper, I would like to share the first lesson my mother taught me about song – “You have to get *inside* your song before you can sing it.” She did not explain beyond that, but, since I already knew the song that occasioned the advice, I understood it to mean that singing demands much more than just learning a tune and a text; the song needs to be understood, and even felt. What does it all mean? Where does it come from? Why was it composed? And even when there is little or no evidence of names, places, or events, it is still possible to get inside the song.

In this session (paper) I hope to follow a path that takes us inside the world of Gaelic song, not only in Scotland, but also here in Newfoundland. Since this original presentation contained around 20 sung examples, I am conscious of the risk of words failing, as the printed page can only give a pale reflection of the sound of the voice. To attain a version that works in print, it has been necessary to adjust my original selection of songs, as several of the pieces did not lend themselves to the page.

Even the most literate singers may agree that it is in listening to a song that we may gain a depth that cannot be transmitted by print alone. To enable readers to listen to sung examples, all the songs quoted here, therefore, have been selected from four accessible sources:

1. The BBC web site launched in 2010 to encourage Gaelic singing:  
[www.bbc.co.uk/alba/oran](http://www.bbc.co.uk/alba/oran)
2. iTunes (references cited in the endnotes)
3. The Lomax Collection on line at the Centre for Cultural Equity, particularly tracks from the CD, *Gaelic Songs of Scotland: Women At Work In the Western Isles* (also on iTunes)
4. For the Newfoundland examples, fieldwork recordings made between 1968 and 2007 available on 2 CDs, *Dileab Ailean: The Legacy of Allan MacArthur – Newfoundland Traditions Across Four Generations* (Bennett, 2009)<sup>2</sup>

In listening to the examples cited one might at least sense the spirit of the songs through these recordings and even become inspired to sing some of them.

Compared with Canada, Scotland is a very small country – from Edinburgh on the east coast to Glasgow on the west is less than 50 miles – but it is a country of enormous contrasts. Culturally, as well as geographically, it could be divided into several areas each reflecting the spirit of the people, their songs, poetry, and music. The area with the largest landmass, the Highlands, is also the most sparsely populated. Along with the Western Isles, it is home to the Gaels who, until the mid-twentieth century, traditionally made their living crofting (working very small farms), fishing, weaving, distilling whisky, and tourism. It has also been an area which has had a long connection with military and naval operations, not only through its history of clan feuds and battles, but also after the collapse of the clan system (1746) through the Napoleonic Wars (Nicholson, 1930),<sup>3</sup> two World Wars and, alas, to the twenty-first century.<sup>4</sup> Gaelic songs and music have been an integral part of every aspect of life, from ancient times to the present day, when it is still possible to hear songs harking back to a time when Scotland and Ireland shared both language and culture, and the sea between was regarded as a highway rather than a division.<sup>5</sup>

While it is not the aim of this paper to dwell on Scotland's history, a brief summary of the social and cultural setting may throw some light on the songs and singing traditions. From twelfth to the mid-eighteenth century Gaelic songs and music reflect a society bound up in the hierarchical clan system.<sup>6</sup> The arts were highly valued in this society, and clan chiefs were the first patrons and sponsors of artists in Gaelic Scotland. The retinue of the chief's household included the bard (who was a highly trained and generally literate poet), the piper, the *clarsair* (harper), as well as the armourer, who was highly skilled in metalwork and Celtic design, creating weaponry, tableware, and jewellery. The greatest artists of that era continue to influence the world of Gaelic music and poetry to this day; for example, the compositions of the MacCrimmons of Skye<sup>7</sup> are still played by pipers all over the world.

Songs that were once the evening's entertainment in the chieftain's hall can still be heard, and in the relatively recent revival of the *clarsach*, they are now likely to be heard accompanied by that very instrument. One of the last clan musicians was Roderick Morrison, a gifted composer, harper, and bard known as *An Clarsair Dall* (the Blind Harper). From the detailed descriptions within his songs one can imagine an evening's entertainment, particularly honouring the family whose culture and hospitality he praises – we can even picture him lulling the company to sleep as they retire to bed. "*Oran do Mhic Leoid Dhun Beagan*" (Song to MacLeod

## **“A Song For Every Cow She Milked”**

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of Dunvegan), for example, runs to over 1,000 lines detailing the lavish hospitality of MacLeod.<sup>8</sup> By way of contrast, Morrison’s song lamenting the loss of his *Harp Key* might enliven any banquet, as it full of double-entendre – the Gaelic word for harp-key, *crann*, is also the word for “mast,” not to mention its common usage as “implement of virility” – he mentions by name some of the girls in the castle, (“MacLeod’s daughter said it would suffice if it was not too small...The MacInnes wench kept saying it was of steel...”) and we can imagine the ribald laughter and the blushes on some maiden’s cheek as he entertained at the banquet. Song-making and singing were by no means confined to the élite and there are innumerable examples of ancient songs that have come down through centuries of oral tradition.

When the clan system broke down after the Battle of Culloden (1746) chiefs who had supported the Jacobite cause were dispossessed of their land. There were enormous changes not only in Highland society but also in the traditional arts, as the official bards, pipers, and harpers no longer had status or recognition. The wearing of tartan and of Highland dress was banned by the Act of Proscription and though the bagpipes survived, the *clarsach* virtually disappeared. Harp tunes endured, however, some through manuscripts from the time, though most through the bagpipe tunes and songs passed down through succeeding generations.<sup>9</sup>

As the composition of Gaelic poetry and song had never, in the first place, been confined to clan bards, it continued to flourish among literate and non-literate song-makers alike. The setting for performance was generally the *taigh* ceilidh, the visiting house, where family and friends would gather around the fire in a humble cottage.

My first example is from one of the very first recordings made in such a setting: Peter Stewart, a crofter-fisherman on the Isle of Skye, was recorded on wax cylinder circa 1910 by Marjorie Kennedy Fraser. A classically trained singer and pianist, she had toured internationally for several years, when she first travelled to the Hebrides on her quest to collect Gaelic songs. Her aim was to publish them with English translations and arrangements so that they could be sung all over the world – “The Eriskay Love Lilt” is probably her best known and her books, *Songs of the Hebrides*, became sources of concert pieces for singers such as the Russian tenor, Vladimir Rosing, and America’s much loved Paul Robeson. On the Isle of Skye she recorded 11 songs from my great-grandfather, Peter Stewart, including “*Oran an t-Saighdear*” (The Soldier’s Song).<sup>10</sup> The house in which he lived was typical of most homes in the Highlands at that time – as was the house in which my own mother was born in 1919 – a single-storey, stone-built, thatched house with a compressed earthen floor, divided into three sections: the entrance was through the first section in which one or two cows were housed; from this was a doorway into a central room with a fire in the middle of the floor where most daily activities took place, and beyond that an unheated room used only for sleeping. While crofting families made a subsistence living on the land, (usually supplemented by fishing) they did not *own* the land but leased it, in payment of a *feu* (fee).

Every aspect of life had songs connected to it, especially daily or seasonal labour done to a particular rhythm, such as milking, churning, spinning, *waulking* (fulling) hand-woven cloth, reaping, or rowing. And when the day’s toil was done, entertainment at the *taigh céilidh* was the expectation and right of everyone, for, wherever you went in Gaelic Scotland, there were *taighean céilidh*, “*céilidh* houses” occupied by storytellers, singers, musicians, and custodians of traditional knowledge.

The word *céilidh* literally means “a visit.” For centuries it was not only the Gaels’ main source of entertainment, but also the setting in which all aspects of oral tradition were handed down from one generation to the next. Sitting around the peat fire (in the old days in the middle of the floor) or by the cast-iron open stove in the kitchen chimney-breast you would hear songs,

music on the pipes, fiddle, accordion, or trump as well as stories and discussions of every aspect of lore and life. Listeners were attentive and hands were usually occupied knitting, carding, twisting rope, or working at any craft that could be done in dim light and restricted space.

The style of singing, entirely unaccompanied, may seem like a world away from the sophisticated arrangements that Marjorie Kennedy Fraser began to feature on world stages.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, it may be said that Peter Stewart, like his kinsfolk, sang his songs surrounded by an orchestra of nature—the steady, metronomic plod of his horse in the ploughshare, the jingle-jangle of the harness, the buzz of bees on a warm summer’s day, the notes of the first cuckoo, the lark, or the swarming gulls when he landed his catch, not to mention the rhythmical sounds of milking, churning, spinning, *waulking*, reaping, or rowing.<sup>12</sup>

Forty years later, when the renowned folksong collector Alan Lomax visited Scotland to record folksongs, little had changed in the crofters’ way of life, except for the fact that the old-style thatched cottages were gradually being replaced by two-storey, whitewashed houses with slate roofs. Even so, very few had indoor plumbing in the 1950s and none had electricity. In those pre-television years, Lomax therefore saw a way of life that had been traditional to Gaels for countless generations and his recordings capturing the natural setting of the singing, by firesides, in byres, barns, and boats, are unsurpassed by any as they portray a way of life that is no more.<sup>13</sup>

Inside her byre on the Isle of South Uist, for example, Mrs Kate Nicolson speaks soothingly to her cow as she begins to milk (Lomax, 2006):<sup>14</sup>

*O Ròsie bhochd, tha mi dol gad bhleodhan.  
Tha mi cinnteach gu bheil thu gabhail fadachd,  
agus gum b’ fheàrr dhomh fhìn duanag bheag a ghabhail dhut.*

Oh, poor Rosie, I’m going to milk you.  
I’m sure you’ve been waiting too long,  
and I’d better sing a wee song for you.

As she begins, you can hear the milk in the pail, rhythmically accompanying her song, “*Crodh Chailein*” (Colin’s Cattle). Though this song is about cows, it was not necessary for the subject to relate to milking, as the essential feature of any work song is that the rhythm fit the activity of the task. The repertoire would vary from person to person as each one would milk the cow at their own desired pace, usually dictated by the fullness of the udder and ease of milking as well as the strength and stamina of the hands (Lomax, 2006).<sup>15</sup>

While recording on the Isle of Barra in 1951, Lomax asked an elderly woman, Mary Gillies, about her song. Apart from wishing to find out what the words meant, there is a sense that he wants to find out if people really *believed* that singing to a cow had any affect on the animal. Perhaps it was merely for the pleasure of the singer? From the conversation Mrs Gillies makes it quite clear that the song is an important part of milking and her friend (who was the local school teacher) adds her emphasis to the conversation:

Mary Gillies: She was saying [singing] “My dear, my dear,” to the cow,  
“you will give me the milk and you’ll not give it to anybody but to  
myself...”

Alan Lomax: Does the song help the milk come, do you think?

## “A Song For Every Cow She Milked”

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Mary Gillies: Yes, she would put her two feet like that and start and listen to you.

Alan Lomax: Can you tell if the cow's really listening to you?

Annie Johnston: Yes, she is listening to you, yes.

In Newfoundland, which I first visited in 1966, one needed only to stop by the farmhouse of one of the Gaelic settlers of the Codroy Valley to find exactly the same practise. At the age of 84, Allan MacArthur reflected on his family tradition:

And my mother had a song for every cow she milked...It was all Gaelic – she never sang an English song...She never milked a cow without singing a song, and the cow would know her, and she had to be very careful when she'd go in the cow-yard because the cows knowed her so well. And she'd be singing a song for every cow she'd milk. And the cows would come to the gate, you see, and the best ones would [be milked first]. The rest would have [to wait]...my mother had to milk that one first, you see (personal communication).

Milking songs are not unique to the Gael, however, as they can be found within other languages and cultures where the practise of singing to cows has existed for countless centuries (Halpert, 2002, p. 123).<sup>16</sup> Today, if you visit any modern milking parlour with hundreds of cows being milked twice or thrice daily, you will find that not only is the entire process mechanised, so also is the music – or muzak. Modern science has proven what tradition has known from time immemorial: the milk yield will be increased if the cows feel relaxed, and music has a soothing, relaxing affect on them.

There is no doubt, however, that the songs benefit the workers, especially in repetitive, tiring movements, as my sisters and I soon discovered when helping my grandmother to churn butter – as long as we were singing, we enjoyed keeping the steady beat going, even when the arm began to weary. The combination of song and movement was almost mesmeric and it seemed to take no time at all before the cream thickened and the butter was ready. The voice of Annie Johnston can be heard singing a churning song, thanks to Lomax's recording on the Isle of Barra in 1951. Her song refers to the Virgin Mary churning her butter, implying that even the divine mother of Christ sang as she worked:

*Am maistreadh a bh' aig Muire  
Air ùrlar a' ghlinne  
A' meudachadh an ìme,  
A' lughdachadh a' bhainne.  
Thig, a' chuinneag, thig.  
Blàthach gu dorn, 's ìm gu uillinn,  
Thig, a' chuinneag, thig.*

The Virgin Mary's churning / on the floor of the glen, / increasing the butter, /  
decreasing the milk / Come, churn, come / Buttermilk to the wrist, butter to the  
elbow / Come, churn, come.<sup>17</sup>

Seasonal labour also had its songs, such as the one that inspired Wordsworth when he composed his well-known poem, “The Solitary Reaper:” “Behold her, single in the field, / ...reaping and singing by herself / ...Alone she cuts and binds the grain / ...I saw her singing at her work and o’er the sickle bending.”

She may well have been lost in some sad, reflective song, though were she in the company of others, as was often the case, she would likely have joined the chorus of one of the communal songs, such as *Buain a’ Choirce* (cutting the oats). Though I do not know of an actual recording of the work, I recall learning it in childhood, complete with actions of an imaginary sickle to emphasise the strong beat that would coincide with the cutting. Though hand reaping with a sickle is now a thing of the distant past, and it is rare even to see anyone using a scythe, the song nevertheless endures and enjoys popularity among singers and audiences of all ages.<sup>18</sup> The same might be said of rowing songs although rowboats are still in use, and a rowing song such as “*Iomaraibh Aotrom*” (row lightly) is more likely to be sung as entertainment. Alan Lomax’s recording made in Skye,<sup>19</sup> however, demonstrates the contextual rhythm while later versions tend to lose the functional characteristics in speeding up the tempo, some to the speed of a motorboat, losing entirely the meaning of the song.

There is a profusion of Gaelic songs connected to wool working, particularly spinning and fulling cloth after it has been woven. Though carding and dyeing wool do not need songs, as neither is rhythm dependent, most hand spinners liked to sing as they worked. Listening to the Lomax recordings you can hear the whirr of the treadle spinning wheel as well as the songs that keep the constant, steady rhythm crucial to spinning – if the rhythm became erratic or if the singer stopped suddenly, that would break the yarn (Bennett, 2006, tracks 13 to 19). As in Scotland, so also in Newfoundland, the songs themselves could be about any subject or could be adapted from another type of song. Allan MacArthur recalled that his mother used to like to sing “*Dean Cadalan Samhach*” a lullaby, which she had often sung to rock her children and grandchildren to sleep:

She was all the time singing, spinning...all the time singing. She had nothing but Gaelic, and most of them were Scotland’s songs that she learnt from her mother.<sup>20</sup> And the last time I heard her sing *Dean Cadalan Samhach* she was spinning at the wheel, singing that song because it goes with the spinning, you see.<sup>21</sup>

On either side of the Atlantic by far the largest number of Gaelic songs of any one genre are *orain luaidh*, which were sung to full the cloth after it has been woven. The process can take over an hour and is done by a team of workers sitting around a long table, or even around an old door set on trestles. The process, generally referred to as “waulking” in Scotland, where it was done by women, and “milling” in Canada, where men and women worked together. In Scotland it died out with the appearance of mechanised woollen mills, for example, in Skye it had gone by the end of the First World War, while in the Outer Hebrides it lasted till the Second World War. Nevertheless, it had been part of a way of life to the women in the Uists and Barra who demonstrated to Alan Lomax in 1951 singing their ancient songs and taking turns to lead the verses while everyone sang the vocable refrains in unison. Later, in his role as broadcaster on the BBC Home Service, Lomax (1957) described what he saw, as well as what it was like to experience their singing:

## “A Song For Every Cow She Milked”

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No man knows how many waulking songs there are, for they are not so much a type, as a sort of maelstrom of song, which has sucked into itself tunes from everywhere...

A dozen women sit round a long table passing a length of dampened tweed from hand to hand... all together [sic] a dozen pairs of hands strongly grasp the tweed; all together they pound or rub it on the bare boards – and on the third beat each woman passes her portion of the cloth to her right-hand neighbour. So, to a grab-pound-pass-grab-pound-pass rhythm, the cloth goes from hand to hand round the table, strengthening, thickening and softening as it goes. Ever the song changes but the rhythm of the work goes on...

You can understand the passion that courses through these women’s work songs only if you remember that the lives of their men depended upon the quality of the tweed. Wet and cold proof, the tweed protected the fishermen on the stormy Minch, and the hunter on the bare hills, from driving rain and hail and the Arctic winds of the islands.

Every moment of the shrinking makes the cloth so much more weather resistant—thus in these songs the two finest human feelings are combined: pride of workmanship and love of family.<sup>22</sup>

Growing up in Scotland on the Isles of Skye and Lewis in the 1950s and 1960s, though waulking songs were frequently sung at home, at school, or at local concerts (cèilidhs), I neither heard nor saw the actual context of such songs. A wide variety appeared in songbooks and collections, though most singers learned through oral tradition—in my own case, washing dishes with my mother was the usual context, as the song not only made the work lighter but also rewarded me with the pleasure of learning another song. My mother had also kept a notebook in which she wrote any new or unusual songs that came her way. Though hers was never published, several amateur collections, which seem to have begun as a hobby, did get printed. Of particular interest to folklorists are those that also include notes about the singers and the context.

One such anthology from the Isle of Skye, *The Gesto Collection of Highland Music*, published in 1895 after forty years of accumulating a miscellany of unclassified Gaelic songs and tunes, includes two photographs of twelve women seated at the waulking table. The editor, Keith Norman MacDonald (1997), who was the local doctor, therefore well known to a wide area of the population, notes:

I am indebted to Allan McDonald, Esqr. younger of Waternish, Skye, for the above photographs of women waulking cloth which is now rapidly dying out [sic]. The eldest or best singer leads with the verse and all join in the chorus (p. 14).

Clearly it was in decline in my grandparents’ time (b. 1881 and 1883) and, by the time my mother was born, 1919, the *luadh* (as they still called it) was truly a thing of the past. It was not

until I went to Newfoundland in the late 1960s that I fully understood how vital such songs were to the people who depended on hand-woven cloth to survive the winter's cold.

One snowy January afternoon, on a visit to an elderly, Gaelic-speaking couple, Allan and Mary MacArthur in the Codroy Valley, friends and family had gathered in their warm kitchen. We sat around the table, with Allan at the head of it, and shared an old-fashioned ceilidh, in the true context: stories, songs, and memories from all the company. Suddenly the table turned into milling boards when Allan began to sing "*Illean Bithibh Sunndach*" (Lads, be happy). He had hardly sung a note when he and three of his sons spontaneously took hold of the table and began to thump it on the boards (floor) with a strong, steady rhythm (Bennett, 1989, pp. 157-158).<sup>23</sup> Many a yard of cloth had been milled in that very kitchen and to the "boys," who were all in their thirties at the time, there was still an inseparable connection between the song and the work.

It was a remarkable experience for all us, including the old man who had assumed that we, being from Gaelic Scotland, would scarcely need an explanation. And so, for the benefit of any who did not speak his mother tongue, he described it:

We had long planks about 6 or 8 inches wide and benches under that, long enough...If you had 30 yards, you double [fold] to 15 yards...Well, that would take quite a space, but not 45 feet because you used to double [fold] the cloth up a little bit so you have enough in your hands [to scrunch it up so you could freely pass it from one pair of hands to the next]. The one [person] at the end was taking up probably about 3 yards of it because he had to keep it up on the end, at the same time from both sides. You'd strike on that side, and then when you'd put down the cloth we'd come down and strike on this side. It used to be thin first and then when you'd be milling like that it would thicken. You had to strike pretty hard on the table with it, and it had to be wet, you see, and soap on it. We used to put it in a tub and put it on those boards. Perhaps before you'd be through milling it you had to wet it a second time; it would mill better, because the dry doth would never mill.

Then you could tell when you would measure it...the cloth that came out of the loom dry was 36 inches wide; well, you'd fix that up and mill it down to 33 or 32 inches. Whatever the women would say – they knowed when it was right. Well, they would measure the cloth and by the feeling of it, it was getting thick after milling so long, probably an hour and a half or two hours. And you had to work hard, and you had to be good to sing too. I seen some of the women do wonderful singing, and they wouldn't stop at one song at all; they would start another up, and then before the second one'd be over, you see the sweat'd be dropping off of everybody. And you daren't stop – you got to keep going! After every verse you're supposed to sing the chorus, you know, so all hands would sing the rounds. Oh you wouldn't hear yourself talking! You'd have to stop talkin', you see, when they would start, when they would be about fifteen or sixteen singing at one time, you know, with the loud voice! And they kept the beat with it. The sweat would be falling off you before you'd be through! And then they would take it – the women knowed when it was milled enough for

## “A Song For Every Cow She Milked”

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pants and coats and vests [waistcoats] and things like that. They had to measure the cloth, you know. When it would come out of the loom, well it would be so wide, you know, and so many inches wide [after it was milled.] Well, the women then they knowed more about it than the men, how to handle it (Bennett, 1989, pp. 153-154).

Allan had learned most of his songs from his grandmother who was “full of songs’ and his mother who knew 60 songs, and some they’d be double [8-line] verses. She couldn’t sing English songs, only all Gaelic – war songs and everything else.” They were clearly an integral part of life, as he demonstrated with the boys when they were about to conclude the (imagined) milling:

Now when the cloth’d be all fixed up, then they’d get a piece of board about 6 inches wide and probably 4 feet long and they would roll it up. Now I don’t know what they call it in English, you know, what we used to call it when the cloth was rolled up – *ga chuir a choinneil*. This is a song we generally use when we’d be through milling the cloth, we’d roll it up, and we would be slapping the cloth. It’s rolled up, and stretched out and rolled up, and we used the song to slap it right down...For that everybody would be slapping like this, their hands slapping the cloth, you know, beating it down, taking the wrinkles out of it. You’d have a spell on this side and then you’d turn it over and you’d do the other side. Well then, you’d do that twice, then it was okay. There’s a separate song for that – it goes faster. And then you’d put it out in the sun to dry you see, the next day and then it was fit for the old people to cut out clothes, whether it was a coat or a vest or pants.<sup>24</sup>

Though the women were the acknowledged experts, unlike the custom in Scotland where only women worked around the table, in Newfoundland (as in Cape Breton) “all hands” literally meant everyone who was willing to maintain the beat and the songs for as long as it took to produce the finished cloth. Naturally the sound produced has a very different tone to the all-women production and although there are many songs common to both sides of the Atlantic, a closer analysis of the wider repertoire will reflect gender bias in the subject matter.<sup>25</sup>

Forty years on (2009), there are now only two boys left, both old men, who, with their sister, are the last native-born Gaelic speakers of the Codroy Valley. The way of life has changed immensely, with every aspect of modern consumerism threatening to homogenise their society with the rest of the English-speaking western world. Yet these Gaelic songs stand as a testimony to the strength of an oral tradition that not only speaks of what once was, but also deserves to be remembered and celebrated. These same songs are an important reminder to all of us that songs and singing are a life force, for in our modern world, with every labour-saving device, we seem to have traded in hard work for something else. As I shared my first lesson in song from my mother, I would like to leave you with an observation she shared with Allan MacArthur as they looked back on the daily routine of milking cows, making butter, knitting, sewing, hay-making, fishing, mending everything from nets to socks: “Oh, there was a lot of hard work to be done, but I don’t remember anyone being stressed, do you?”

The younger generation, who no longer have the language but have every material comfort imaginable, still love to sing. They compose and sing new songs, all in English, and several of

the MacArthur family have made a career out of music. In 2009, however, when preparing a concert tour to Scotland, the highlight of which was to visit the Isle of Canna (home to the MacArthurs until the 1820s) they decided to include some of Allan's (Grampa's) songs in the concert set. Having recorded him in the first place I had the pleasure not only of teaching them, but also of sharing their return to Scotland. This was not merely a return to a country, however; it was also an opportunity to experience a new dimension to singing.

What then, of Scotland today, or the future of these old songs? The Newfoundland Gaels are relatively new to revivalism, as for some the functional context of their songs never did die. In most parts of Gaelic Scotland, work songs have been kept in circulation outwith their original contexts, and also by Gaelic choirs, most of which compete in competitions. The major annual event, *Mòd Nàiseanta Rìoghail*, the Royal National *Mòd*, a festival of Scottish Gaelic song, arts, and culture, is held every October in a different place, giving choirs a focus for the entire year when they usually practise weekly. Since its inception in 1892, songs of every genre have been arranged in four-part harmony, and though technically that did not exist in tradition but is based on the Welsh Eisteddfod choral tradition, yet it has breathed new life into many songs. There are competitions also for composers and arrangers as well as a host of solo, duet, and quartet competitions.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, many of the young up-and-coming singers and musicians have an appreciation of Gaelic tradition and they have demonstrated great skill in their adventurous new arrangements. In the original presentation in St. John's we heard one of Allan MacArthur's songs, "*Oran nam mogaisean*" (the Moccasin Song) sung to a grunge guitar with a backing chorus inspired by First Nations singers, yet it is undeniably a song rooted in tradition.<sup>27</sup>

The scope for choirs is as wide as it is inviting. We might enjoy the basic differences between the old context and the new, in that singers need not sing to get their work done nor need they be restricted to singing in unison. Most important of all, however, is that they will discover what the old singers knew all along: in sharing the voices and the songs we share a freedom from the stresses of modern living that seem to find their way into our lives. Quite simply, singing is good for you!

## Endnotes

1. Allan MacArthur, Codroy Valley, Newfoundland, recorded in 1970.
2. Based on 40 years of archive recordings from the one family, this publication is the only comprehensive collection of Newfoundland's once vibrant Gaelic song tradition.
3. According to Nicolson (1930), between 1797 and 1837 the Isle of Skye alone contributed 21 lieutenant or major generals, 45 colonels, more than 600 commissioned officers, 120 pipers and 10,000 other army ranks. These figures do not include those who served in the Royal or the Merchant Navies.
4. For example, the Highland regiment, the Black Watch, was the first regiment to be called to Iraq by Tony Blair, soon followed by the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and the Royal Scots, as all Scottish regiments, have been part of the British Army for more than two centuries.
5. The ancient warrior Cu Chulainn trained his warriors on the Isle of Skye and Scotland has many legends and songs about the third and fourth century heroes, Fionn, Oscar, as well as Deirdre.
6. The word "clan" is from *clann*, Gaelic for "children," and just as a father is responsible for the well-being of his family, so the Chief was regarded within the clan. Mutual loyalty and

## “A Song For Every Cow She Milked”

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- protection were fundamental values, and so were the hereditary rights to cultivate land and to fish.
7. The MacCrimmons were hereditary pipers to the MacLeods of Dunvegan, Skye. Tuition was rigorous and tradition has it that it took seven years and seven generations to become a great piper. Although their college of music at Borreraig (arguably the oldest college of music in Britain) is now a ruin, yet the lineage of MacCrimmon pipers continues to the present day through Canadian born MacCrimmons who have held the honorary position of pipers to the clan (Among the best of Scotland’s twenty-first century pipers is Alberta-born, Calum MacCrimmon, a prize-winning piper and composer, who now lives in Scotland).
  8. Singer Alma Kerr is accompanied on piano, [www.bbc.co.uk/alba/oran](http://www.bbc.co.uk/alba/oran); there is also a choral version, which will illustrate the potential among present day singers and choirs.
  9. In 1931, the founding of the *Clarsach* Society restored the use of the instrument, which, since the 1970s, has enjoyed a phenomenal revival with young, virtuosic harpers as well as bands, which feature both traditional styles and funky new arrangements with electronic harps. In my original paper I played an example of a lullaby, *Gur Milis Mòrag*, (My Sweet Morag), sung with *clarsach* accompaniment: iTunes, Margaret Bennett, CD, *Take the Road to Aberfeldy*, track 7.
  10. The recording is the opening track of the CD *Glenlyon: A Song Cycle*, by Martyn Bennett (Footstompin’ Records CDFSR1714). Listen at: <http://itunes.apple.com/us/album/buain-a-choirce-reaping-song>
  11. The original Gaelic songs were translated into English by the Rev. Kenneth MacLeod for publication in Kennedy Fraser’s three-volume *Songs of the Hebrides* (between 1909 and 1921). Marjorie also did concert tours with her daughter, Patuffa, who played *clarsach* (harp) and they were celebrated in many parts of the world; see for example, the review, *New York Times*, March 17, 1916.
  12. The “orchestra of nature” is at the heart of the interpretive work of Martyn Bennett (1971-2005), released on *Glenlyon: A Song Cycle*, featuring recordings across five generations of his own family. (Peter Stewart was his great-great-grandfather). Martyn’s arrangements include many of these sounds, including the mechanical clatter of a threshing machine as well as the chilling sound of gunfire. The album opens with Marjorie Kennedy Fraser’s recording of Peter Stewart singing “*Oran an t-Saighdear*” (the Soldier’s Song).
  13. During one week’s visit in 1951, Alan Lomax recorded over 250 Gaelic songs, some centuries old, others composed within the decade. He published a selection of songs from his Scottish tour on volume 5 of the 18 volume series, *Columbia World Library of Folk and Primitive Music*, Columbia Masterworks Records (1956); the 12-inch record had Scots songs on side A and Gaelic on side B, though the scope of the disc only allowed for incomplete versions as Lomax wanted to give as wide a range of examples as possible. Notes are by Hamish Henderson and on the CD release by Rounder Records (2000) the updated notes are by Hamish Henderson and Margaret Bennett. In 1959 Lomax released a second 12-inch record with a wider distribution, *Heather and Glen: Songs and Melodies of Highland and Lowland Scotland*, (on the Tradition label). Further releases did not appear until after Lomax’s death in 2002 (<http://www.culturalequity.org>). Examples are available on iTunes).
  14. The conversation as well as the song is on Track 3 of *Gaelic Songs of Scotland: Women at Work in the Western Isles* (full transcriptions, translations, and notes by Margaret Bennett). Also available on iTunes.
  15. Listen also to tracks 7 to 12, Lomax, *Gaelic Songs of Scotland*.

16. One striking example, recorded by Herbert Halpert from Mississippi singer Mrs O. Womble in 1939, deserves mention: "My goodness, I never start milkin' the cow without I go singin'! It's just a natural habit..." Originally published in *The Folksinger Speaks* (1944).
17. In the Lomax archive, filed under "churning," <http://research.culturalequity.org> Also available on iTunes; COLUMBIA SL-209 1952/ ROUNDER CD-1743 1998.
18. "Buain a' Choirce" version by Martyn Bennett is accompanied by the Scottish small pipe and a percussion section that includes the sounds of a sickle and a threshing machine. Available on iTunes.
19. Lomax archive, filed under "rowing," <http://research.culturalequity.org> Also available on iTunes; COLUMBIA SL-209 1952/ ROUNDER CD-1743 1998.
20. Her people were MacIsaacs from Moidart, on the west coast mainland; they emigrated in the 1820s; Allan's father's people, the MacArthurs, were from the Isle of Canna.
21. Allan himself sings the song on track 21 of CD2, *Dileab Ailean-The Legacy of Allan MacArthur*, text and translation, pp. 71-72.
22. I would like to thank Anna Lomax for sending me a copy of the transcript to her father's BBC broadcasts: *A Ballad Hunter Looks at Britain*. This was from his script of Programme 6 (of 8), "Songs from the Highlands and Islands of Scotland," transmitted on November 22, 1957. The songs can be heard on tracks 20 to 38 of *Gaelic Songs of Scotland: Women at Work in the Western Isles*.
23. Musical transcription by Martyn Bennett. A recording of song made on that visit can be heard on CD1, track 2, *Dileab Ailean: Allan's Legacy*. Text, translation, and notes, pp. 23-26.
24. They sang a song composed by his brother Murdoch, "Òran an Tombaca" (The Tobacco Song), which is on *Dileab Ailean*, CD 1, track 13.
25. For example, a song such as "'Cha déid mi do dh'fhear gun bhàta'" (track 28 of Lomax, *Women at Work in the Western Isles*), is very much a "women only" song, as all join the chorus which means, "I'll not go to a man without a boat / I prefer a man of gentle speech / I'll not go to a man without a boat," and different kinds of men are the subject of ten verses. There is an element of exclusivity, even freedom, that can be detected in the "women talk" of such songs.
26. In my original presentation I played example of a choral arrangement for *port-a-beul*, dance song, demonstrating not only the scope for choirs but also the lively sound and precise rhythm that can be attained with practise. For example, Aberfeldy and District Gaelic Choir produced a CD, 'Co Eismeachd', which demonstrates the scope.
27. *Dileab Ailean*: CD2, tracks 15 to 18 trace the song, from start to finish, from the ancient to the techno-modern (arranged by Martyn Bennett, 1999).

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## **“A Song For Every Cow She Milked”**

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