

# ‘Recorded by the School of Scottish Studies...’ The Impact of the Tape-Recorder In a Rural Community

MARGARET BENNETT

## ABSTRACT

‘Recorded by the School of Scottish Studies...’ The Impact of the Tape-Recorder In a Rural Community. Most people in Scotland interested in traditional songs and stories will have heard the phrase ‘they were recorded by the School of Scottish Studies’. From 1951, when the School was founded, those whose songs, stories and oral traditions were of interest to collectors and research staff enjoyed the prestige of having their names linked with what has become our national collection. For many years, the fact that a singer or story-teller had been ‘recorded by the School of Scottish Studies’ would often form part of an introduction at a ceilidh or a concert.

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The Impact of the Tape-Recorder  
In a Rural Community

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Most people in Scotland interested in traditional songs and stories will have heard the phrase ‘they were recorded by the School of Scottish Studies’. From 1951, when the School was founded, those whose songs, stories and oral traditions were of interest to collectors and research staff enjoyed the prestige of having their names linked with what has become our national collection. For many years, the fact that a singer or story-teller had been ‘recorded by the School of Scottish Studies’ would often form part of an introduction at a ceilidh or a concert. Today, with much of the archived material available on the website *Tobar an Dualchais / Kist o’ Riches*, singers of a younger generation still mention that the song they are about to perform was ‘recorded by the School of Scottish Studies’, and may even mention the name of the ‘source-singer’ from whose recording they learned it.

Growing up in Skye, I first became aware of the School’s activities in the 1950s, though I did not encounter the phrase until 1960, when there appeared on the market a twelve-inch LP entitled *Gaelic and Scots Folksongs*, accompanied by a booklet of notes by Hamish Henderson and James Ross. One of the singers featured on this LP was Duncan Beaton – *Donnchadh Peutan*, who had been recorded for the Linguistic Survey of Scotland in the late 1940s. He was a crofter in Uig who had been a neighbour of my grandparents, and whose remarkable singing is still remembered though he died in 1955.<sup>1</sup> Since my family had known Duncan, and because of the high esteem he had enjoyed in our community, our copy of this LP became well-worn at Band 4: ‘*S mi air m’ uilinn ’sa’ leabaidh*’ – and almost as often as it was played, it was followed by a comment on the man himself, his repertoire, his remarkable breath-control (‘a whole verse in one breath!’), and how wonderful it was that he had not only been recorded, but that his singing had been chosen for inclusion on this record. Despite the fact that Duncan had been recorded before the School of Scottish Studies came into being, this commercially-available recording inevitably linked his name with that of the School and its growing collection.

In 1953, several years before his appointment to the School of Scottish Studies, John MacInnes made a fieldtrip to Skye, during which he recorded several singers, adding a significant contribution to the archive. In a recent conversation with me, he recalled:

I don’t remember a time when Gaelic songs weren’t one of my greatest interests.... I had uncles who sang – there were singers everywhere and from the age of sixteen I started learning [songs], collecting them.... So [in June 1953, after finishing at University] I borrowed a tape-recorder from the School of Scottish Studies, and they gave me blank tapes.... The only training was on how to use the machine, as I had done an earlier recording for the Linguistic Survey.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Duncan Beaton was recorded in the late 1940s by the late Derick Thomson for the Linguistic Survey of Scotland, whose recordings subsequently became part of the Archives of the School of Scottish Studies. Only one of these recordings, of the song *Allt an t-Siùcair*, has so far been made available through the *Tobar an Dualchais* website, but it gives a sense of why this singer enjoyed the reputation he did; see [www.tobarandualchais.org](http://www.tobarandualchais.org), Track ID 88148.

<sup>2</sup> Private conversation, 19 December 2012.

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Although John's trip coincided with the Portree Mòd, he did not confine himself to recording the Mòd singers, but also took the opportunity to visit other tradition-bearers in the community, people from whom – as the archived tapes reveal – he recorded a significant number of local legends, tales and traditions. It was on this fieldtrip that John MacInnes recorded my mother, Peigi Bennett (née Stewart, b.1919) – *Peigi Iain Phàdruig* – whom he had heard singing at the Mòd that year. The song she sang, *Fhleasgaich òig ma chuir thu cùl rium*, was one that John had not heard before, and he recalls that she told him she had learned it from Katie Anne Nicolson from Braes.<sup>3</sup>

My mother is now 94 years old, and, as far as I know, the only one of those whom John MacInnes recorded at that time who is still living. Although she claims to have a poor memory, she was able to recall the occasion when I asked her about it recently:

**MB:** Do you remember John MacInnes recording you in Portree?

**Peigi:** Yes, it was in Ina Douglas's house. There was a flat attached to the Drill Hall and the Douglasses lived in it. .... John and Dr Allan [Macdonald] heard me singing this song at the Mòd and wanted to record it because they'd never heard it before.... [*She hums the song*] But it wasn't a good place that we were recording in, because it was a sort of attic and it was closed in and I felt that my voice was coming back at me. It wasn't a good place [acoustically]...

**MB:** Where did you learn that song?

**Peigi:** I might have learned it at school. You see, there used to be a singing teacher going round, the *Bodach Seinn*, so it could have been then. That's a long time ago [mid-1920s to mid-30s].

As John remembered Peigi telling him where she learned the song, I returned to the topic several weeks later and resumed the conversation:

**MB:** Do you remember a Katie Ann Nicolson?

**Peigi:** Oh yes! She was a lovely singer. Miss Nicolson – she used to teach the seniors in Uig School – she was my teacher too. She was from Braes and she was full of songs. She used to get us ready for the Mòd... (*begins to sing*) *A' fhleasgaich ùr, leanainn thu*. I believe that was one of them.

**MB:** Oh yes, you taught me that. And what about *Fhleasgaich òig, ma chuir thu cùl rium*?

**Peigi:** Oh yes, I believe that was one of Miss Nicolson's songs. Oh, she was a lovely teacher.... Have you got my notebook, Margaret? It's in that. And that's the song I sang for John MacInnes.

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<sup>3</sup> The 7-inch reel is archived at the School of Scottish Studies. On the lid of the box is SA 1953/167, Reel No. 6, a list of names of singers, titles of songs, and dates of recordings (June 24 and 25). Neither the name of the fieldworker (John MacInnes) nor place recorded (Portree) appears, but both were noted in the tape-index and transcription book. The first track was Mrs Bennet [*sic*]: *Fhleasgaich òig ma chuir thu cùl rium*. To hear the song, go to [www.tobarandualchais.org](http://www.tobarandualchais.org), Track ID 12329. This is the only recording of this song that exists in the School of Scottish Studies Archives.

Hò rinn ò hi rì - hò rò u Hao ri rì ho rò u éi - le,  
 Hò rinn ò hi rì - hò rò u  
 Fhleas-gaich òig, ma chuir thu cùl rium, Feuch gur i an diugh a thréig thu. D.C.

*Hò rinn ò hi rì ho rò u  
 Hao ri rì ho rò u éile  
 Hò rinn ò hi rì ho rò u.*

- |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Fhleasgaich òig ma chuir thu cùl rium<br>Feuch gur h-ì an diugh a thréig thu. | <i>Young lad, if you have turned your back on<br/>me / You can be sure (in the first place)<br/>that it was she who betrayed you.</i> |
| 2 | Ghabh thu 'n t-seann té leis an stòras<br>Ged a' bha sin òg le chéile.        | <i>You took the old[er] woman with the<br/>wealth / although we were young together.</i>  |
| 3 | Càch a' dannsa aig do bhanais<br>'S mis' 'gam sgaradh o mo chléibhe.          | <i>Others [are] dancing at your wedding /<br/>and here I am tearing my heart out.</i>   |
| 4 | 'S beag a shaoil mi anns an àm sin<br>Gum biodh do luaidh air aon té eile.    | <i>Little did I think at the time / That you<br/>would give your love to any other.<sup>4</sup></i>                                   |

The notebook to which Peigi referred was one she began keeping in her teens. In it she wrote certain songs, including this one,<sup>5</sup> though well-known songs such as *Fear a Bhàta* would not be included, as the notebook was kept only for the songs she heard that had not been published – ‘it was important not to lose them.’<sup>6</sup> Peigi also jotted down the melody of some songs in sol-fa notation, ‘just in case someone else happened to want the tune’. When the songs began to appear in print, the notebook began to lose its value to her. In 2012, however, Ainsley Hamill, a student at the

<sup>4</sup> The text and translation given here were recently (2013) supplied from memory by Peigi herself, and the text was found to be identical to what she wrote in her notebook when she first learned the song. Regarding the second line of the first stanza, she explained: ‘The young woman singing the song is sure that it was the older woman who put him up to the betrayal – in other words, she set him up to forsake his first love.’ Referring to the expression *Feuch gur...*, she said, ‘That’s what we’d say to someone, in the sense of “you can be darned well sure that something or other went on”. It’s a kind of a warning, a caution.’

<sup>5</sup> Alan Bruford notes that ‘A typical song notebook...seems to have been one written mainly when the compiler was young, probably under twenty....’ (Bruford 1986: 102).

<sup>6</sup> On a fieldwork trip to Arisaig in 1906, Lucy Broadwood (1858–1929) noted that 30-year-old Kate MacLean, whose home contained copies of MacKenzie’s *Sar-Obair* (1841) and Sinclair’s *An t-Oranaiche* (1879), was ‘singularly intelligent at avoiding published songs’ for the recording (Broadwood *et al.* 1931: 281).

Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, compared my mother's notebook texts to those of the same songs in published collections, and discovered no identical versions.<sup>7</sup>

Peigi shared her interest in Gaelic song with her grandson, composer and musician Martyn Bennett (1971–2005), who himself recorded several Gaelic tradition-bearers, including Flora MacNeil and John MacInnes (Bennett 2006: 59–63). He was deeply interested in the older styles of Gaelic singing, and regretted the demise of tradition with the new generation's preference for songs easily accompanied by three chords on the guitar. When Peigi told Martyn that her grandfather, Peter Stewart, had been recorded on wax cylinder by Marjory Kennedy Fraser, he was inspired to create a song cycle to include this recording as well as the 1953 recording of Peigi singing *Fhleasgaich òig, ma chuir thu cùl rium*. Within a soundscape of old and new, he hoped to reflect the evolution of family music-making across five generations.<sup>8</sup>

Though the Kennedy Fraser recording had been made before Peigi was born, the act of being recorded had clearly made an impact, as Peigi could remember being told about it from a very early age:

She was collecting old songs, and my grandfather must have known a lot of old songs. And she was staying in the shooting lodge, 'Conon Lodge' (it became the doctor's house later on) and she was wanting people to sing so that she could record them – you know, so people would remember all the old songs. So she *sent* for him – she didn't go to Glenconon; my grandfather went along to the Lodge and she recorded him there. [Peigi begins to sing one of them] *Air maduinn dhomh 's mi sràideaireachd ...* Oh, yes my father used to sing that too – and so did Doctor Allan. Now he had a lot of old songs – I believe he might have got that one from my father.

Although none of the singers or their families ever heard wax cylinder recordings until the end of the twentieth century, and very few had access to Mrs Kennedy Fraser's *Songs of the Hebrides*, it was the very act of being recorded that lent distinction to these singers and their communities. In Kennedy Fraser's day, Skye crofters with their 'great genius for music and mechanics' (Martin 1716:199) would have been just as fascinated with the wax-cylinder recorder as later generations were with the reel-to-reel tape recorders of John MacInnes's time. Fieldworkers of the tape-recorder era remember the external microphones, stands, heavy batteries, adapters (13 amp, 15 amp, round pins, square pins, and, just in case, a two-pin), extension cables and spare reels, not to mention the crawling behind couches to look for plugs, fixing fuses, sitting on the floor and changing reels mid-sentence. To those who were recorded, however, the lasting memory is that they were 'recorded by the School of Scottish Studies'. For sixty years that has helped validate tradition-bearers – for some, it has even become something of a badge of office, as it is the fact of *being recorded* that carries the weight – and helped them to realise that the songs, stories and traditional lore that they inherited from previous generations were of value not just to them, but to people beyond the Gàidhealtachd, to the people of Scotland as a whole, and to the world beyond.

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<sup>7</sup> Ainsley Hamill, unpublished research paper, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Martyn Bennett's CD 'Glen Lyon' includes this track from SA1953/ as well as two of the songs recorded c. 1910 by Marjory Kennedy Fraser.

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