

Songs of the Hebrides and the Critics

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Marjory Kennedy-Fraser has been a figure of controversy for a long time. Indeed, no aspect of her life and work – her expeditions to the Gàidhealtachd for the purpose of collecting Gaelic songs; her transformation of these into art-songs with English texts and piano accompaniments; her subsequent publication of *Songs of the Hebrides* and related works; her lecture-recitals of Gaelic and other ‘Celtic’ music in the halls and drawing-rooms of Edinburgh; her collaboration with the Rev. Kenneth MacLeod and her friendship with prominent figures in the Celtic Revival; even her physical appearance and character – has escaped the notice of her critics, including some who became heavyweight champions of the art and culture of Gaelic Scotland. For the past seventy years and more, the noise and smoke generated by these big guns has made any objective reassessment of Mrs Kennedy-Fraser difficult and unlikely. Even today one continues to hear her name disparaged by people who, however little they actually know about her, nonetheless take refuge in the common consensus that her work was of no value – indeed, that it did actual harm to the Gaelic tradition – and that she herself was little better than an air-headed, money-grubbing opportunist.

In this paper, I would like to examine Mrs Kennedy-Fraser’s life and work in light of the criticisms levelled at her. Enough time has now elapsed that the battle over her reputation has a certain historical interest; and while some snipers may yet be lurking in the hedgerows, it should now be possible to determine why and how the battle was joined in the first place.

The details of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser’s background and upbringing have been the subject of frequent summary; those of the Rev. Kenneth MacLeod are perhaps less well-known, the most illuminating picture of his life being that published by the Rev. Thomas Murchison in his introduction to MacLeod’s Gaelic prose writings, *Sgrìobhaidhean Choinnich MhicLeòid*. While we shall have more to say regarding their collaboration in due course, a brief review of their lives may be helpful at the outset.

Marjory Kennedy-Fraser (1857–1930)¹

Marjory Kennedy was born into a musical family in Perth. Her father, David Kennedy, was a tenor specialising in Scottish song. As her father’s accompanist from the age of thirteen, Marjory regularly performed with him for concert audiences of nostalgic Scots both at home and on extensive overseas tours. In the course of these travels she studied singing in Milan and Paris, where she absorbed not

*Soraidh le NicUalraig-Fhriseal
bean uasal ise gun chron;
spoth i ar Ceòlraidh lùthmhor
's chuir i siùcar air an lot.*

Farewell to Kennedy-Fraser
An untarnished gentlewoman;
She gelded our vigorous Muses
And put sugar on the wound.

– Somhairle Mac Gill-Eain (2011: 420-1; *trans.* Christopher Whyte in Mac Gill-Eain 2007: 142n.)

¹ This summary of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser’s life and work is largely indebted to Dr Per Ahlander, whose introduction to his edition of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser’s autobiography, *A Life of Song*, presents a balanced, insightful and sympathetic account of her activities and their place in the cultural life of her times.

only the latest vocal techniques, but also the musical language and theoretical basis underpinning nineteenth-century opera and art-song.

Marjory was in her mid-twenties when she began to take an interest in Gaelic song. The intense nationalism of late-nineteenth-century Europe, and the resulting enthusiasm for art reflective of national heritage – including the fashion among composers of the time for appropriating and transforming musical materials encountered among ‘the folk’ – no doubt encouraged her to think of her Gaelic-speaking ancestors and wonder about the songs they had sung. The language, however, was a difficulty. Although her maternal grandfather had been brought up with Gaelic, he refused to speak the language as an adult, and Marjory herself had had little exposure to Gaelic as a child. To address this deficit she began in 1882 to study the language and songs of the Gael with the poet Mary Mackellar, then living in Edinburgh. That same year she arranged a number of Gaelic songs for a trio of unaccompanied female voices, and the performance of these became part of the family’s concert repertoire.

Following her father’s death in 1886 and that of her husband, Alec Yule Fraser, in 1890 after only three years of marriage, Mrs Kennedy-Fraser supported herself and her two children by teaching, performing recitals, and lecturing on musical topics (one popular series was entitled ‘Songs and Song-Writers’) to Edinburgh audiences. In 1892, she joined the first intake of women students at the the University Edinburgh, where she undertook formal study of music with Professor Frederick Niecks. Beginning in 1904, she was a regular music critic for the *Edinburgh Evening News*. As a result of all of these activities, she became a familiar member of Edinburgh’s cultural scene at a time when the Celtic Revival was attracting the enthusiastic interest of middle-class audiences and the attention of artists and scholars in the capital and beyond. Indeed, her friendship with Alexander Carmichael, whose *Carmina Gadelica* had begun to appear in 1900, his daughter Ella Carmichael, and with symbolist painter John Duncan were to have a direct influence upon her work in later years.

Mrs Kennedy-Fraser first visited the Western Isles in 1905, when she was persuaded to travel to Eriskay by Duncan, who had visited the island the previous year, painting and studying Gaelic. The trip was intended to furnish material to expand her repertoire; in the event, it altered the course of her professional life. From 1907 onwards, her performances of Gaelic songs – arranged as art-songs with piano accompaniment – became a phenomenon of the Celtic Revival movement in Scotland, in which context her concerts and lecture-recitals proved enormously popular. When the first volume of *Songs of the Hebrides* appeared in 1909, its sales indicated that there was a strong market for such productions, and Marjory undertook further collecting-trips, usually accompanied by her daughter Patuffa or, in later years, by her sister Margaret Kennedy. Further volumes of *Songs of the Hebrides* appeared in 1917 and 1921; *From the Hebrides: Further Gleanings of Tale and Song* was published in 1925; and a final volume, *More Songs of the Hebrides*, came out in 1929, a year before her death.

That same year saw publication of her autobiography, *A Life of Song*. Per Ahlander describes the influence of *Songs of the Hebrides* upon the arts establishment in Great Britain, and her role in bringing Gaelic song to the notice of a wider audience both at home and abroad (Ahlander 2012: xxi):

In her ambition to show Gaelic culture as one of the many, equally valuable and important components of Europe’s cultural heritage, Kennedy-Fraser was successful indeed. Influential individuals of the period were fascinated by the many songs and tales she published together with Kenneth Macleod.... Her *Songs of the Hebrides* recitals became regular features of the prestigious London music scene, and her

recitals in continental Europe, as well as her contacts with Maurice Duhamel and other international authorities on folk music, made Hebridean music known far beyond the Anglo-Saxon parts of the world. ... Apparently her voice even found its way into Westminster. In July 1918, when the Scottish Grand Committee discussed an amendment to the Scottish Education Bill, ‘providing for the inclusion of schemes for the teaching of Gaelic in Gaelic-speaking areas’, Mr A. F. Whyte MP ...[stated that he] ‘should be prepared to base his case for the fostering of Gaelic on one point alone, namely, on the very remarkable collection of poems

The Rev. Kenneth MacLeod (1871–1955)

Kenneth MacLeod was born in Eigg, where his father, Donald MacLeod, was schoolmaster. Following the death of his mother when Kenneth was only six years old, his father’s sister Janet came to look after him and his five surviving siblings; this aunt, who was still alive during the period of his and Mrs Kennedy-Fraser’s collecting activities, was the source of many of the items recorded in *Songs of the Hebrides*. Kenneth was proud of his MacLeod ancestry: his father’s family were MacLeods from Fàsach in Waternish in Skye, and he was proud of the care his ancestors had taken to preserve and maintain not only the family *sloinneadh* (Kenneth could trace his descent from Iain Borb, Chief of the MacLeods of Harris, Dunvegan, and Glenelg in the first half of the 15th century) but more especially the poetry and oral traditions of the MacLeods. In addition, his upbringing in Eigg, at the centre of Clanranald territory, enabled him likewise to absorb the lore and traditions of that great clan. During Kenneth’s childhood, Eigg retained a large enough population that he was able to experience first-hand the vigour of the native traditions of the Gael – ceilidhs and waulkings, songs and lullabies, prayers and charms, clan sagas and legends, stories of Cuchullain and Fionn Mac Cumhaill, supernatural tales and lore, proverbs, onomastic legends, legends of St Columba – in their natural setting and social context. From boyhood he took a keen interest in such material, and this enthusiasm remained with him throughout his life.

Kenneth MacLeod was thus heir to generations of orally-transmitted lore from two of the great clan traditions of the Gàidhealtachd; and what he had not learned in boyhood he absorbed during his twenty-year career as a Church of Scotland lay preacher, and thirty as an ordained minister of the Gospel. For half a century he served parishes in Morvern, Skye, the Uists, Kintyre, Perthshire,

‘Road to the Isles’

*Thèid mi thun nan Eileanan
is ataidh mi lem bhaothalachd
mu bhruthan sìth an Canaidh 's Eige
mu ghusgal ròn an Èirisgeidh,
mu chlàrsaichean 's mu Eilean Bharraigh,
mu Fhir Ghorma 's mu Chaitligich
mu thaighean dubha 's tràighean geala,
mu Thir nan Òg 's mun lùbhrach Bhallaich:
cuiridh mi iad ann mo phòcaid
airson snaoisean mo shròine,
airson boillsgeadh mo shùilean,
airson gealach mo rùintean,
airson braisealachd goil coire
a thaobh brèige is goileim.
Gabhar dhìom am fìor Ghàidheal
a rèir meud mo mhòr-phàighidh
leis na tàlantán diadhaidh
a thruis 's a sholair mi 'na crìochaibh:
gabhar sràid leam an Dùn Èideann
an crois 's am breacan an fhèilidh,
boillsgear follais aig gach cèilidh:
càrnar leam tùis mar dh'fheumar
air altairean Khennedy-Fraser,
seinnear duanagan...*

I will go to the Isles
and inflate with my vapidity
about fairy mounds in Canna and Eigg,
about the wailing of seals in Eriskay,
about ‘clarsachs’ and the Isle of Barra,
about Blue Men and Catholics
about ‘black’ houses and white strands,
about Tir nan Og and the Speckled Barge:
I will put them in my pocket
as snuff for my nose,
as a light to my eyes,
a moon to my desires,
to make my kettle boil the quicker,
for lies and chatter.
I will be called the ‘true’ Gael
according to the extent of my large endowment
with the holy talents
I collected and procured in this country.
I will promenade in Edinburgh
in the belted, kilted plaid;
I will shine at every ‘ceilidh’,
heap incense, as is fitting,
on the altars of Kennedy-Fraser.
I’ll sing ditties...

– Somhairle Mac Gill-Eain (2011: 14-15)

Strathspey, Ardchattan, western Inverness-shire, and – for most of his ordained ministry – Gigha and Cara. In all of these places he gained familiarity with a variety of Gaelic dialects and the lore and traditions embedded in them. MacLeod was thus ideally qualified to guide Mrs Kennedy-Fraser, whose slender knowledge of Gaelic and of the ways of the Gael required the support of a Gaelic-speaking advisor if her project of recording Gaelic songs were to succeed. As the well-regarded heir to a wide spectrum of traditional material, Kenneth MacLeod spoke with authority. Among his fellow Gaels he was widely respected, and when Mrs Kennedy-Fraser asked Professor Donald Mackinnon of Edinburgh University to suggest a Gaelic-speaker who might be able to advise her in her work, Mackinnon recommended Kenneth MacLeod.

Despite what we are told was an initial reluctance to be drawn into Mrs Kennedy-Fraser's undertaking, MacLeod was eventually persuaded to offer his services, and the collaboration between them lasted for 20 years (Murchison 1988: xxxiv). Indeed, the project seemed tailor-made for him. Thomas Murchison quotes an address given by MacLeod in 1932, on the occasion of the Diamond Jubilee Concert given by the St Columba Choir, in which he recalled a performance he had heard them give in 1889:

‘MacCrimmon’s Lament’, as sung that night...has been singing in my ears ever since. Every singer in that choir was for the time being MacCrimmon himself, pouring into other hearts the nobleness of his sorrow, which means, of course, great singing. I am glad to know that two or three members of the 1889 choir are with us tonight, and after all those years I thank them from the heart for having set a Hebridean boy dreaming of what might be done with the songs of the Gael. Not only was the choir formed at the very dawn of the modern Gaelic movement, but in a real sense it was itself that dawn. At any rate, it created an atmosphere in which it was possible for patriotic Gaels to make great ventures, such as the founding of the Mod in 1892, and, if the best way of drawing people towards Gaelic is through song, then we owe that best way to the St Columba Choir, the mother of many children (Murchison 1988: xvii-xviii).

Clearly, here was a Gael who, by his own account, believed that something ‘might be done with the songs’ of his native people, and who approved the efforts in that direction undertaken by ‘patriotic Gaels’ in founding the Mòd, the organization largely responsible for promoting the harmonized rendition of Gaelic song.²

MacLeod’s approach to Gaelic texts was, to say the least, flexible. He saw no harm in allowing his imagination – informed, as he saw it, by his rich upbringing in Gaelic lore – free rein in adapting and improving texts that were fragmentary or that he deemed second-rate or flawed. The results are to be seen throughout *Songs of the Hebrides*, in his editing of the Gaelic texts of songs he and Mrs Kennedy-Fraser collected, in his composing of new texts for tunes that had none (or whose texts he

² Malcolm MacFarlane took a very different view of the St Columba Choir, whose annual concerts he for some years attended: ‘The singing which I heard at those concerts was of quite another order. The main difference consisted in the music being regarded as of first importance and the words of secondary importance. ... [T]he soloists at those concerts... made themselves, more or less, musical instruments, contrary to the practice of the old singers, who mostly sang with animation and feeling, determined to do justice to the words, be the fate of the music what it might. The St Columba Choir was the pioneer Gaelic Choir, and it had much influence in modernising the style of Gaelic singing. In fact, it was that choir which made choral singing one of the phases of the Gaelic Movement’ (MacFarlane 1929: 254).

deemed unsatisfactory), in his English translations and adaptations, and in his summaries of legends and lore, interspersed among the songs, which are clearly intended to authenticate the texts of the songs to which they refer. The Gaelic material was, after all, the property of the Gael – of people like him – and he claimed the right to make such changes as he himself thought appropriate and consonant with Gaelic tradition.³ Murchison quotes as follows from an unspecified paper among Kenneth Macleod's 'lectures and other writings' (1988: xxxi):

I now come to the question which is asked oftener than any other: Will you tell us exactly how you have treated the material collected in the Hebrides? First of all, Mrs Kennedy-Fraser and myself had to decide whether we should work from the artistic or from the antiquarian standpoint. Sometimes, of course, the two can be combined; sometimes they cannot. If you hear a beautiful tune wedded to hopelessly poor words, or beautiful words to a hopelessly poor tune, and you give them to the world exactly as you heard them, you are working from the antiquarian angle. If you throw away what is worthless, whether tune or words, and try to get something better, you are working from the artistic angle. It seemed best, both for Gaeldom and for the world at large, that we should only preserve what was worth preserving.

In the following passage, MacLeod revealingly distinguishes between 'the people' and 'the public', signalling his understanding that the presentation of Gaelic songs to the latter would require certain changes (Murchison 1988: xxxvi):

For instance, labour songs, as sung by the people, have no stereotyped beginning or end. In fact, they have no end at all, being circular tunes. If you wish to arrange them for the public you have to choose where to begin and where to end effectively. Sometimes, too, in Mrs Kennedy-Fraser's arrangements, a commonplace phrase is omitted altogether, and a particularly attractive one repeated oftener than in the original version – repetition being perhaps the dominant note in genuine Hebridean song, whether words or music. But no matter how the tune is arranged, the original material remains – nothing is added to it, though something may be purposely left out. Nothing

³ Indeed, MacLeod appears to have taken similar liberties with the story of his own life. Murchison writes (1988: iii): 'Whimsical, imaginative, humorous, and (as a friend of many years said) "a past-master in the art of gentle leg-pulling", Kenneth Macleod was the kind of person with whom and about whom fact and fancy so easily become intermingled. Over the years he was frequently written about, and especially by a number of authors who wrote books about the Highlands and Hebrides. There is the mystery about the precise year of his date of birth. There are myths about his sudden ending of his Glasgow University course because of ill-health and his immediate going on a sea trip to Australia ...; about the circumstances of his entry into collaboration with Mrs Kennedy-Fraser; and about how and where he wrote the song, "The Road to the Isles".... There is the myth of his having been a student at St Andrews University. There were times when one could not be sure whether one was meant to believe the story he was telling, or whether he himself believed it! A friend who knew him well said this in a published tribute: "There was an elusive quality about him that made it impossible to gauge whether he believed in the fabulous lore that seemed to rise spontaneously out of his knowledge and his poetic invention".'

has amazed me more in Mrs Kennedy-Fraser's art than her gift of making a few notes into a song, and yet preserving the tune as sung by the folk.

Clearly, both Kenneth MacLeod and Marjory Kennedy-Fraser agreed upon a basic principle: native Gaelic song would require modification if it were to be rendered comprehensible to an audience of non-Gaels. What neither of them perhaps anticipated was the possible reaction of Gaeldom itself to their comprehensive appropriation, re-arrangement and re-presentation of traditional material as art-song for the mainstream, middle-class, urban-dwelling, English-speaking audiences of their time.

Admirers and Adversaries

Mr A. F. Whyte, MP, was not alone in praising Mrs Kennedy-Fraser and *Songs of the Hebrides*. Indeed, Mrs Kennedy-Fraser included two early 'appreciations' of her work on the last page of the second volume (*SOTH II*: 244). First, she quotes eminent music critic Ernest Newman:

Mrs Kennedy-Fraser holds the highest place among British folk-song collectors. She has laboured hard in the collection and editing of Hebridean song. She has a poet's love of the islands and the peculiar phase of civilization they represent; but she is also a very skilled musician, and the accompaniments she has arranged for these songs are equal to the best that has been done in any other field.

Significantly, Newman praises Kennedy-Fraser as a collector, editor, and arranger; the actual composition of the melodies he credits to the island 'song-writers' themselves, whom he considers the equal of Schubert and Hugo Wolf: 'Schubert himself never wrote a more perfectly satisfying or more haunting melody, for example, than that of the "Sea-gull of the Land-under-Waves".' On the same occasion, Kennedy-Fraser quotes composer Granville Bantock's opinion that *Songs of the Hebrides* 'is a classic work, unique in its knowledge and expression of the peculiar characteristics of Gaelic Music'. These reviews clearly pleased and encouraged Mrs Kennedy-Fraser, and in subsequent years she cited the authority of Newman and Bantock when called upon to explain and justify her work.

Shortly thereafter Ezra Pound, in a 1919 review written under the pen-name 'William Aetheling' in *The New Age*, reveals that Mrs Kennedy-Fraser's arrangements of Gaelic song had found an enthusiastic audience in London:

There is music which reminds one of great forests, of wind and unbridled ocean; there is music, by no means inferior, which reminds one of gilded chairs and the court of *Le Grand Monarque*; and there is music which reminds one of nothing so much as of too much underwear and too many waistcoats.... These traditional melodies of the Gael are among the musical riches of all time, and one need use no comparatives and no tempered adjectives to express the matter. They have in them the wildness of the sea and of the wind and the shrillness of the sea-birds, and whether they will pass away utterly with the present industrious collector I am unable to say.⁴

⁴ As quoted by Anne Lorne Gillies (2010: 1).

SONGS OF THE HEBRIDES AND THE CRITICS

The appearance in 1925 of *From the Hebrides: Further Gleanings of Tale and Song* inspired the following from Hugh S. Robertson, founder of the Glasgow Orpheus Choir, who wrote as follows in *The People's Journal* (as cited in MacDiarmid 1975: 99):

In turning over the pages and finding here and there a gem of purest ray serene and everywhere the stamp of the pure gold of achievement, my heart went out to that patient grey-haired woman who lives under the shadow of Edinburgh Castle, and who over many years has laboured so fruitfully in this field of her own choosing. What is there within knowledge that is likely to outlive 'The Eriskay Love-Lilt' or 'The Seagull of the Land-Under-Waves'? Many of these Hebridean songs fall easily within the category of 'great'. That they are not all exactly as they fell from the lips of the people is not the sound argument many well-meaning Gaels think it is. Nor does it take us further to say that some of the songs, like the 'Twa Sisters', have been pieced together. Both statements may be true, but might be adduced more fitly as testimony to the art of the composer. Again, some folk are fond of reminding us of the invaluable collaboration of Kenneth Macleod.... The fact is Mrs Kennedy-Fraser has done what only a fine artist can do. She has put the songs into what seems to her (and what seems to many competent judges) the most artistic and permanent form. Furthermore she has given to the songs a background of pianoforte accompaniment which in itself is a work of genius....

Five years later, equally fulsome praise was heaped upon *Songs of the Hebrides* by George Malcolm Thomson, journalist and publisher, whose *A Short History of Scotland* appeared in 1930 (Thomson 299). In crediting Mrs Kennedy-Fraser with 'discovering' Gaelic song 'before it passed away', Thomson goes beyond calling her a 'collector' and provides a vital arguing point for future critics:

...the discovery by Mrs. Kennedy-Fraser of an exquisite folk-poetry and folk-music among the Gaelic-speaking fisherfolk of Eriskay and other Hebridean islands. It is one of the most romantic and fortunate accidents in modern history that this small and lovely world yielded up its treasure before it passed away.

Sir Robert Rait and Dr George Pryde, co-authors of *Scotland in the Modern World* series, express a similar view (1934: 302):

In our own day Mrs. Marjorie Kennedy-Fraser tapped an almost untried source in Gaelic folk-poetry (though Burns did use a few Gaelic airs) and made the nation her debtor with her edition of songs of the Hebrides. To deride work of this kind as a tampering with the genuine product of the folk spirit is inept and ungracious, yet it is still occasionally done. Not only is it clear that the essentials of the originals are generally preserved and that the alterations and additions are improvements; it is even doubtful if, in many cases, anything would have survived without the interested labours of these collectors.

Such views were no doubt representative of the mainstream, non-Gaelic-speaking 'public' who were, after all, the intended audience and market for *Songs of the Hebrides*. It also seems clear that Kennedy-

Fraser's arrangements found approval among many middle-class Gaels seeking respectability and acceptance in mainstream Scottish society – Gaels who, since the Education Act of 1872, had been educated solely through the medium of English, who supported the National Mòd and the Comunn Gàidhealach, and whose musical and literary tastes had become conditioned by their exposure to the mainstream culture over several generations.⁵ Just as many of them (including Marjory's grandfather, Charles Fraser) declined to speak Gaelic as adults because it carried, for them, a stigma of backwardness and poverty, so they also preferred Gaelic song as performed on the concert platform, rather than as it would have been sung round a smoky fireside in a thatched house in which the human inhabitants shared living-space with cattle.

As we shall see, the excessive praise initially lavished upon *Songs of the Hebrides* eventually provided a stick with which subsequent critics attacked the work. Even so, some people appear to have expressed misgivings at an early date, when the volumes were still coming out and the concerts were first being performed. Here is a letter, dated 30 November 1909, written by Frances Tolmie to Marjory Kennedy-Fraser after hearing two of the latter's recitals of Gaelic song (Bassin 1977: 118):

Let me express in a few lines how much I was impressed at both your Recitals of our native melodies arranged according to the principles of Art.

I listened with much pleasure, as I recognised each familiar strain, but at the same time with bewilderment, and a sense of my own profound ignorance of the region into which you were leading the audience, and a strong desire to hear everything *over*, and *over* and *over* again, and learn in truth. Could one leap at a bound into all this inner meaning and exposition of our Hebridean life to which you have devoted your genius, without preliminary experience, however true one's power of Intuition might be?

Aspiring, waiting, and thanking Miss Kennedy and you with all my heart for a great Lesson, and with kindest regards to you, and to Mr. Kenneth Macleod who has done his part so admirably....

Frances Tolmie – native Gael, author of *105 Songs of Occupation*, her collection of songs from Skye which was published in the *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* in 1911– knew a great deal more about Gaelic song than Mrs Kennedy-Fraser; but, self-effacing and ladylike to a fault, she confesses only to 'bewilderment' at what she has heard, and gently questions whether 'Intuition', however powerful, might be capable of 'leap[ing] at a bound into all this inner meaning and exposition of our Hebridean life.' Tempering these comments – which hardly need tempering in any case – she characteristically expresses the hope of 'learning in truth' from Mrs Kennedy-Fraser's work more about the artistic value of her own tradition.

We may assume that other early critics spoke directly to Kennedy-Fraser and Kenneth MacLeod; at the very least – as we may adduce from Hugh Robertson's references to 'many well-meaning Gaels' and to Sir Robert Rait and George Pryde's reference to the 'ungracious and inept' comments of

⁵ John MacInnes tells me that, as a boy attending Portree School in the 1940s, he and his classmates occasionally attended concerts of Gaelic song at the Portree Drill Hall. These concerts regularly featured Mòd Gold Medal winners like Gilbert MacPhail, Kenneth MacRae, and Neil MacLean – trained singers – and some of the concert arrangements they sang were undoubtedly those of Kennedy-Fraser. He and his classmates unquestioningly accepted that what they were hearing was 'outstanding singing'. It was only later, having discovered elderly relations who knew songs from oral tradition, that he came to appreciate the difference between the concert versions and 'the real thing'.

unnamed critics in the passages quoted above – they grumbled among themselves. The following argument, from the introduction to the second volume of *Songs of the Hebrides*, is a clear – if admittedly specious – response to people who had apparently objected to the piano accompaniments (*SOTH II*: xix):

For me, these sea-chants of the Isles are always accompanied (in the mind's ear) by nature sounds. Conrad speaks of "the deep bass-like chant of the sea," and of the "shrill pipe of the wind played on the sea-tops," and "the occasional punctuating crash of a breaking wave". These are ever behind all the croons we heard in the Isles, and we cannot do full justice to the Hebridean songs if we attempt – away from the sea – to sing them unaccompanied. The accompaniments, therefore, have not been provided merely for the "amusement of a lay public," although such subjective treatment has been accused of being "more artistic than documentary," yet, on the other hand, the bare statement of a melody in notation does not convey its full significance, and phonograph records even give but a rhythmically emasculated version of many of the finest songs.⁶

The first Gael openly to express an opinion was Malcolm MacFarlane (1853–1931), who commented upon *Songs of the Hebrides* in an address to the Gaelic Society of Inverness in 1925 (1929: 252-72). In comparing Kennedy-Fraser's work to that of Frances Tolmie, in remarking upon the 'false Gaelic spirit' of the 'new words' supplied to the songs, and in drawing attention to the commercial motivation for the work, MacFarlane's remarks presage the critical storm to come (MacFarlane 1929: 261):

Mrs Kennedy Fraser's Collection is also marred by the tunes being adapted to English words and by the liberties taken with their original forms; and they have, in cases, to be timed anew for the Gaelic singer. Also, the new words are often conceived in a false Gaelic spirit for which there is no valid excuse. Miss Frances Tolmie's excellent collection of Skye airs can be relied on as giving the tunes in accordance with the forms in which she found them. It was not, like some recent publications, conceived in a mercenary spirit, for upper and middle class English consumpt, but was given for preservation to the Folk-Song Society.

Another early critic was the redoubtable Hugh MacDiarmid (C. M. Grieve, 1892–1978), guiding light of the Scottish Literary Renaissance, who was to exert a considerable influence on Sorley MacLean and other Gaelic poets and writers in the coming decades. In an article published in April,

⁶ Mrs Kennedy-Fraser, if she is indeed the author of this passage, is expressing views shared by Kenneth MacLeod, as in the following: "This question of accompanied or unaccompanied singing I am not, of course, competent to discuss. But let me say that I have hardly ever heard unaccompanied singing in the Hebrides. Rowing songs were accompanied by the swish and the swash of the oars and the plashing of the waves, waulking songs by the thumping of the same waulking, spinning songs by the hum of the wheel and the foot-work of the spinner.... Personally, then I like to hear an artist's accompaniment, if only as compensation for all that the songs lose when taken away from their own surroundings" (Murchison 1988: xxxviii).

1926, in the *Scottish Educational Journal*, MacDiarmid soundly rebutted Hugh Robertson's piece in *The People's Journal* (MacDiarmid 1975: 99–100):

What is the truth about these *Songs of the Hebrides*? In the first place they are not Hebridean songs at all. They are in no way essentially Scottish even. And above all...they do not even belong to the present; they are definitely 'dated' – they belong to the '90s and have the appropriate artificiality and decadence. The readiness with which they have found widespread popularity – their success in 'playing to the gallery' – is, in itself, the strongest evidence against them. Already questions are being asked.... Mr Ernest Newman, for example, feels 'that the application of cold scientific tests to the whole body of Hebridean song would yield some quite positive conclusions.' The first stage in that work, were it to be undertaken, would require to be the establishment by strict scientific principles of a reliable basis on which to found the theories that were to follow. That could not be done with the *Songs of the Hebrides* as issued to the public by Mrs Kennedy-Fraser and her collaborator. Their work is not done on scientific principles, cold or otherwise; and anyone undertaking research or study in Hebridean song and music as revealed in them would be wasting time and effort. The music given to us – at least in some of the more popular items – is adapted to the accompanying English words and the original Gaelic ones are disregarded. The tunes would have to be taken out of their settings, which are not in keeping with the melodies and the original words. The English words would have to be relieved of all camouflage which tends to delude the unwary. For instance 'Kishmul's Galley' would have to be tamed down to 'MacNeill's Boat.' Evidence along these lines...(the examples mentioned will be in themselves sufficient to show most people that we have here again something not dissimilar to the mongrel work of Ossian or 'Fiona Macleod' in the literary sphere)... in no way impugns the artistic quality of the Kennedy-Fraser work; but it proves that to call it Hebridean is misleading and unwarrantable and that if, through it, 'the name of Scotland is carried furth of Scotland and honoured,' Scotland is accepting bouquets on false pretences.

MacDiarmid's broadside marked the onset of a torrent of criticism, and may indeed have sparked some of it. Whatever critical views may have been politely expressed while the enterprise was still underway, in the 1930s the gloves came off, and it became clear that a number of Gaels were happy neither with the contents of *Songs of the Hebrides*, nor with the praise that the work had received. By then, the Celtic Revival and the genteel fantasies of Edwardian Scotland had been swept away. The emergence of Modernism in the years following the Great War had a peculiar intensity for Scotland, and especially for Gaels: not just the carnage of the war itself, which robbed so many communities of their young men; nor the worldwide economic slump of the 1930s, with the decline of Scotland's shipbuilding and other heavy industry, that deprived those who had survived the war of a livelihood; but also the unkept promises made to those who had fought, the Gaels' ongoing demand for rights to the land upon which they had lived for centuries, the continuing erosion of the Gaelic language, and the mass emigration of Gaels to Canada and elsewhere – anger about all of these things energized the response of a new generation of university-educated Gaelic-speakers to what they rightly saw as the

exploitation of their native arts by the same dominant culture that seemed hell-bent on destroying their way of life.

For such critics, Mrs Kennedy-Fraser represented an ideal target, especially in light of her commercial success and the praise that had been lavished upon her. Sorley MacLean (1911–1996), just twenty-three years old, sounded the outraged keynote in his seminal essay ‘Realism in Gaelic Poetry’, first published in 1934 (MacLean 1985: 19):⁷

The special brand of romanticism attributed to the Gael and his poetry is a romanticism of the escapist, otherworldly type, a cloudy mysticism, the type suggested by the famous phrase, ‘Celtic Twilight’. This Celtic Twilight never bore any earthly relation to anything in Gaelic life or literature. It was merely one of the latest births of the English literary bourgeoisie, and its births are to Gaelic eyes exceedingly strange, whether they be Mr John Duncan’s St Bride or the late Mrs Kennedy-Fraser’s ‘Mairead òg with her sea-blue eyes of witchery’.

In a subsequent essay he draws the following vivid analogy (MacLean 1985: 107):

In 1920 the ‘image’ of Gaelic song was to almost all articulate Gaels only as mediocre Victorian Gothic is to the Gothic of the 12th or 13th centuries.... The Celtic Twilight of the 1890s and its product, the *Songs of the Hebrides*, were to the realities of Gaelic song poetry as Victorian Gothic is to the North French cathedrals.

John Lorne Campbell (1906–1996) had, in the 1930s, not just an aesthetic but also a practical motive for objecting to the work of Mrs Kennedy-Fraser. He was at that time embarking on his own collecting work in Barra and South Uist, and knew the rich heritage of song that still survived in the Western Isles and, to an extent, in mainland Gàidhealtachd areas. In this and in later commentary he lamented the assumption, expressed by many of Mrs Kennedy-Fraser’s admirers, that Gaelic culture was dead, that she had ‘saved’ the last remnants of Gaelic song, and that therefore (and this was his greatest fear) nothing else need be done. Here is what he wrote in *The Book of Barra*, first published in 1936 (1998: 223–4):

Gaelic [Mrs Kennedy-Fraser] did not know and never came near to mastering. ... The methods of her collecting involved formal recitations of a kind that must have been prejudicial to the spontaneity of the singer. It is not too much to say that she regarded the traditional music of the islands as an excellent mine, a source of good musical material to be refined and made presentable for English-speaking audiences. ... The result has been widely acclaimed.... It has

⁷ It seems probable that MacLean was voicing the views not just of himself but of Hugh MacDiarmid, with whom he had become friendly, and of other Gaelic poets of the period. In a February, 1940, letter to fellow-poet Douglas Young, George Campbell Hay praised MacLean: ‘How long ago was it that the last Gaelic poetry that really meant anything was produced? At the time of the evictions? Long since anyway. But from these poems it looks as if we are getting out of the rut at last. ...[Mr MacLean] has avoided our continual lyricism, which at present looks like becoming as maudlin as the Lowland lyric once was. Nor...has he wandered off into a drawingroom Tir Nan Òg at the heels of the Clàrsach Society and the Kennedy Frasers’ (Hay 2000/2003: 503).

also created...a curiously false impression of the Hebrides based on the author's own romanticized attitude. ... Moreover, as long as it is taken for granted that the *Songs of the Hebrides* is a collection of authentic Gaelic airs and words, the danger will remain that the genuinely authentic versions of these songs will perish unrecorded.

Campbell's concern was echoed a year later in a perceptive comment by Australian musician and folksong enthusiast Clement Hosking (1896–1966), when he was interviewed by the music critic of the *Glasgow Herald* following a visit to the Hebrides (Coombs 2006: 17):

Mr Hosking, while fully appreciating what has so far been done for Hebridean song, particularly by Mrs Kennedy Fraser – it was through her work that his interest was first aroused – believes that the general result is not quite true to the originals. And in Barra he was impressed by the number of songs he heard which the people declared had never been collected – songs with the most intricate rhythms and fascinating variety of melody. 'I am convinced,' he told me, 'that the only way such songs could be faithfully secured would be by means of careful recording strictly adhered to. The records would capture the text with the tune: and the text, say the people, must be regarded as of equal importance with the melody.'

The scorn expressed by MacLean and the practical note sounded by Campbell and Hosking were both to the fore some years later, when a concert of Gaelic song presented at the Edinburgh Festival in 1948 provoked a storm of controversy in the letters columns of *The Scotsman*.⁸ The argument was ignited by a comment from a Banffshire correspondent writing under the pseudonym 'Sleepers Awake':

It does not seem to be realised by all Gaels that, with few exceptions, the only editions of Gaelic songs which are of sufficient musical standing to be internationally presentable (I mean as music, not as folklore) are those of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser. One has only to read the comments of European music critics (including Ernest Newman, who may be regarded as of European standing)...to see how very highly her own concerts were appreciated all over the most civilised and cultured parts of Europe. What higher praise could possibly be given than to be compared with Schubert and Wolf? ... If the Festival announced that the entire Kennedy-Fraser collection would be systematically worked through in, say, three years, the Usher Hall could be filled many times over....

To this red rag a trio of Gaelic bulls – Sorley MacLean, Hector MacIver and Torquil Nicolson – predictably responded:

For many years the presentation of Gaelic songs on the concert platform and on the radio has been a pain and humiliation to all who really know and care

⁸ 28 August–16 September 1948. The examples given here are excerpts from longer letters published in the paper. Other notable contributors to this correspondence included poet and scholar Douglas Young, a former leader of the SNP; and Arthur Geddes, son of Patrick Geddes, an Edinburgh contemporary of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser's in the pre-war years.

SONGS OF THE HEBRIDES AND THE CRITICS

for the unequalled song music of Gaelic Scotland. ... At the Central Hall on Friday... Miss MacMillan gave the great lament for John Garve of Raasay, but gave it spoilt by Mrs Kennedy-Fraser. Miss MacDonald sang the very fine 'Reubadh na Mara,' also a Kennedy-Fraser adulteration.... Mrs Kennedy-Fraser has always spoilt the really great song, sometimes, it is true, only a little, but often, very much.

Another anonymous correspondent, 'A. M.' of Edinburgh, weighed in to similar effect:

'Sleepers Awake' seems to demand of Gaelic folk-songs to be something which they are not. No one should require of the folk-songs of any country to be artificially translated into another idiom, as has been done in the case of Hebridean folk-songs by Mrs Kennedy-Fraser. ... In art, as in other media, the genuine is preferable to the sham. Mrs Kennedy Fraser's versions of Gaelic folk-songs are not claimed by her as her own original work. Neither are they faithful reproductions of the songs as originally heard by her. Had she recorded the genuine article in addition to her own rendering of it there would be less reason to find fault with her. It could then be left to the individual taste to choose between the two versions. As things are, foreigners are deluded when they think they are listening to Hebridean folk-songs. What they are listening to is Hebridean folk-songs as Mrs Kennedy Fraser thinks they should be sung.

At this point Joyce Fleming, another Edinburgh correspondent, expressed what was likely to have been the view of many members of what Kenneth MacLeod called 'the public':

Your Gaelic purists would have it both ways, and submit cultured audiences to the Gaelic songs in their raw state, inflicting upon them interminable verses in which the melody is lost in an overdose of words and impoverished by singers who have either lost the natural art of singing or have failed to acquire it. These are the faddists who choose to vilify the work of a great pioneer and musician of Mrs Kennedy Fraser's calibre, without whose work the songs of the Hebrides would undoubtedly never have penetrated beyond the Minch, and would, in fact, exist only in their raw condition, geographically inaccessible and musically indigestible to the world in general.

Joyce Fleming may have wished she had kept her head down when she read the riposte from Messrs MacLean, MacIver and Nicolson the following day. Clearly, the concept of the 'flame-war' predates the Internet by a good many years:

Gaelic civilisation, which by inference [Joyce Fleming] disparages, is much older, much more invested with prestige, much more noted for the production of beautiful art forms, much more charged with pride and dignity than anything native to the 'civilised audiences' for whom the fine Hebridean songs must apparently be emasculated and distorted and 'set' and 'arranged' to bring them within the range of their appreciation. We believe that very many of the older Gaelic songs are great music in their own right, and deplore the meretriciousness which Mrs Kennedy-Fraser has too often substituted for their

intensity and subtlety. Our only concern with Mrs Kennedy-Fraser's work is that it interferes with the genuine preservation of a heritage of songs that, properly presented, would be Scotland's greatest contribution to the Festival. But we are 'faddists' to the extent that we think none the less of 'Cumha na Cloinne' and 'Maol Donn', although they have never been hits with the petty bourgeoisie of Edinburgh and London.

At last John Lorne Campbell, writing from Barra, contributed to the argument. His letter was co-authored by Annie Johnston, who had herself helped to facilitate Mrs Kennedy-Fraser's collecting activities in Barra, and who subsequently recorded many songs at the behest of both Campbell himself and of researchers from the School of Scottish Studies:

We would like to express our complete agreement with the recent letters of Somhairle Maclean, Hector MacIver, Torquil Nicolson, and 'A. M.' on this subject. The neglect of the objective method in the study, recording, and presentation of our Gaelic folksongs is extraordinary and inexplicable. If Scotland had been a Scandinavian country our universities would long ago have sent trained collectors to record, preserve and publish every scrap of our Gaelic folk music in an authentic form. As it is, this magnificent tradition has been the plaything of dilettantes and careerist musicians, and nine times out of ten at least is presented on concert platform and radio in a garbled form.

A couple of days later, Campbell wrote again, this time at greater length, as President of the Folklore Institute of Scotland, the organization which he hoped would encourage 'objective' collecting and become a repository for the traditional culture of Gaelic Scotland.⁹ He, too, began by addressing Joyce Fleming:

Nor is Mrs Kennedy Fraser the pioneer in the field of Gaelic folklore collection that Miss Fleming thinks; much more valuable work was done, from an objective point of view, by Miss Frances Tolmie, who published 105 genuine folk-songs, with the words, from the Isle of Skye...but, being an objective study, of course it got no recognition from the lovers of Celtic twilightry. Mrs Kennedy Fraser was indebted to Miss Tolmie for a number of her airs.... Actually, the most interesting part of Mrs Kennedy Fraser's publications are those portions of the prefaces where a few untouched-up versions of the airs are printed – usually without words. For the rest a particularly objectionable feature is the invention of imaginary categories of Gaelic folk-songs to which arch and sentimental titles are usually attached, such as "Sea Rapture Songs," "Clan Chants," and so on – all part of the subjective method used.

As regards Mrs Kennedy Fraser's records, these were made on a very primitive type of recording machine and were, even before this war, totally inaudible owing to the growth of mould on the wax cylinders. ... Fortunately, however, better recordings of the same and many other songs have been made both before and since the last war by myself and by the Irish Folklore

⁹ See Hugh Cheape, "'Tha feum air cabhaig": The Initiative of the Folklore Institute of Scotland'. *Scottish Studies* 37 (2014), 53–62.

Commission, and work is now in progress preparing the genuine versions of the songs for publication, after which it will be possible for both musical and Gaelic students to make a direct comparison between Mrs Kennedy Fraser's version and the real thing.¹⁰

Mrs Kennedy Fraser did not pretend that her versions were the original folk-songs, and they should not be presented at concerts as such. Nor is she the only person who has collected folk-songs in the Hebrides, nor is her collection exhaustive or anything like exhaustive of Gaelic folk-song. The merit of her arrangements is a matter of musical taste; at least those of us who know what the real thing is like are entitled to hold the opinion that the real thing is superior to her versions of it. It is remarkable how the fog of the Celtic twilight persists to bemuse public opinion: all this is on a par with MacPherson's "Ossian" and Villemarqué's "Barzaz Breiz." It is time this twilight was illuminated by a little objectivity.

Among all of these commentators, Campbell was clearly the most inclined to treat Mrs Kennedy-Fraser in a fair and – to use his own favourite word – objective manner. On the one hand, he was appalled by the extent to which her presentation of Gaelic song reflected the gaseous excesses of the Celtic Twilight, as in this passage from an article published in *The Scots Magazine* ten years after the *Scotsman* letters appeared (Campbell 1958: 309):

The first volume of *Songs of the Hebrides* appeared in 1909, and it... appealed to the preconceived ideas and emotions of a public ignorant of the true nature of Gaelic folksong and oral literature. ... But the great mass of the English-speaking public prefers to have it vague, misty and sentimental; that is what Mrs Kennedy Fraser gave it, and she had an immense and immediate success.

At the same time, he was careful to give credit where it was due. In the same article he wrote (309-10):

All three [i.e. Marjory Kennedy-Fraser and the American collectors Evelyn Benedict and Amy Murray, all of whom visited Fr Allan MacDonald in Eriskay in 1905] were infected with the Celtic Twilight in varying degrees, but... Mrs Kennedy Fraser's infection comes out in her treatment of the tunes she collected, while her descriptive writing on Eriskay, which obviously impressed her very much, is excellent. ...

We must praise [Mrs Kennedy Fraser] for her qualities of resolution, appreciation, musicianship and determination to collect her material in the face of very considerable physical difficulties of travel and with only very primitive recording apparatus, whereas modern folklore collectors with tape recorders and much better transport, have a far easier time of it.

¹⁰ Campbell and Francis Collinson's three-volume collection of waulking-songs, *Hebridean Folksongs*, appeared between 1969 and 1981. This is very likely the work-in-progress to which he is referring here.

Perhaps most important, he was fair-minded enough not to blame Mrs Kennedy-Fraser for the excessive claims made by her admirers (Campbell 1958: 313-14; my italics):

If the arrangements of Mrs Kennedy Fraser and Kenneth MacLeod have given pleasure to millions outside the Hebrides, it is equally the case that *the effect of the dead hand her admirers have laid upon the recording and study of our authentic Hebridean folkmusic has been utterly deplorable*. ... I would like to suggest that we Scots should honour Mrs Kennedy Fraser for her discoveries and her good qualities, which I have mentioned, without being blind to the defects inherent in her system of presenting her material, and, still more, without being blind to the very inadequate measures taken to follow up her pioneer work.¹¹

Campbell's willingness to acknowledge that Kennedy-Fraser had actually done 'pioneer work' stands greatly to his credit. Unfortunately, however, the even-handedness of his remarks has not been sufficient to settle the matter of Mrs Kennedy-Fraser's controversial legacy. The criticism has continued to the present day, and the idea that her art-song arrangements somehow 'destroyed' traditional Gaelic song has now become common wisdom among right-thinking Gaels and, for that matter, non-Gaels who wish to be thought right-thinking. (Perhaps significantly, it is always Mrs Kennedy-Fraser herself who attracts the opprobrium; the Rev. Kenneth MacLeod's role is rarely mentioned.) Note the unappealing mixture of willful ignorance and arch *ad feminam* comment in the following, from Roger Hutchinson's biography of Fr Allan MacDonald (2010: 175-77):

[Marjory Kennedy-Fraser] embarked on a lucrative crusade to collect, clean up, rearrange and rewrite in English for a drawing-room audience as many Gaelic songs and tunes as she could find. If she could not find them, she made them up. ... [While John Duncan painted, Marjory Kennedy-Fraser] strolled around [Eriskay] with the musical equivalent of a butterfly net. ... The disciplined philologist and folklorist in Allan MacDonald cannot entirely have approved of this English speaker cherry picking in his culture....

As we shall see, 'strolling' is hardly a fair description of the difficulties Marjory encountered in getting around the island; and to call her activity 'cherry-picking' is as unfair as it is unattractive. As regards Fr Allan's attitude towards her, there is every evidence that he was not only a willing teacher, but that she was an apt and interested pupil.

Another critic, the singer and broadcaster Anne Lorne Gillies, in addition to commenting on specific items from *Songs of the Hebrides* in the notes to her own collection, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland* (2005), has more recently reviewed the latest edition of Mrs Kennedy-Fraser's autobiography, *A Life of Song* (2012), in *ElectricScotland*, an online publication.¹² Like Hutchinson, Gillies feels herself to be on safe ground. Dismissing Ezra Pound's opinion, expressed in the 1919 review quoted above, she

¹¹ Campbell felt that he had good reason to complain, writing that, in the 1930s, his academic interest in Gaelic song had been viewed by some as 'an example of narrow nationalism...; or as indicative of personal bias or feelings against Mrs Kennedy-Fraser, a thing which has been continuously hinted at by sundry critics of our work and our writings on traditional Gaelic song'; see Campbell and Collinson, *Hebridean Folksongs III* (1981): 324n.

¹² The article, downloadable as a pdf file, is six pages long; page numbering is absent from the document but has been assumed here for ease of reference.

argues that, far from suggesting ‘great forests...wind and unbridled ocean’, Mrs Kennedy-Fraser’s work literally stinks (1):

To most Gaelic noses, I suspect, Marjory Kennedy-Fraser’s arrangements smell more of the gilded chairs and waistcoats. And most Gaelic-speakers, I’m sure, would argue that the obstinate refusal of their culture to ‘pass away utterly’ owes little to the industry of Kennedy-Fraser.

Secure in the support of ‘most Gaelic-speakers’ for her views, Gillies summarizes the events of Marjory’s life as if she were drawing a cartoon (2):

Who could not marvel at the intrepid twelve-year-old Marjory who sets off to play pianoforte accompaniment for her father...on a prolonged concert tour that turns her adolescence into a blur? From city concert halls to barns in remote villages, Marjory (with parents, siblings and piano in tow) splashes, splashes, slithers, rides bareback and, when all else fails, walks across fords, ravines, sands and quagmires to bring echoes of “their ain folk” to home-sick ex-pat Scots in every corner of the British Empire.... Who could not admire the feisty Edwardian widow who keeps the wolf from the door by teaching singing and piano, writing music reviews and delivering lecture-recitals, and is rewarded by a CBE, a Civil List pension and an honorary doctorate from the University of Edinburgh?

But of course, the whole enterprise comes down to money-grubbing in the end (2):

She had already learned to sing a few Gaelic songs in her youth, her interest apparently aroused by what she calls her ‘racial’ background: her father’s great grandfather fought at Culloden...; and of course a Gaelic song or two, arranged for female trio, would be useful for the Kennedy sisters to perform on tour.

Gillies’ choice of language and her relentlessly sarcastic tone – signified all too often by her use of inverted commas – reveal how comfortable she feels criticising a non-Gael, a classically-trained musician who (oddly enough, not unlike herself) made her reputation performing artfully-arranged Gaelic songs to tasteful accompaniment, and publishing sumptuously-printed collections of such songs for a paying public. Kennedy-Fraser’s decision to devote one of her lecture-recitals to the music of the Outer Hebrides was ‘presumptuous’ (2). She is credited at one moment with having a ‘good sense of humour’, but in the next is accused of having ‘an alarming lack of it’ (3). She is acknowledged to have been ‘one of the first British song-collectors to make mechanical recordings of Gaelic songs’, but in the next phrase it is implied that the credit for her use of the technology should be given to ‘able and educated Island community leaders like Annie Johnson (*sic*) of Barra and her brother Calum’ (4). Finally (4):

...[H]aving carefully carried her fragile “graphophone” to the Outer Hebrides, can she easily be forgiven for openly and unrepentantly ‘processing’ this ‘raw material’ into (to quote Professor Tovey of Edinburgh University) ‘settings that would find wide acceptance among music lovers other than those disposed to confine their attention to primitive music...’

Forgiven? Apparently not. Kennedy-Fraser's attitude towards the words of the songs she collected was, according to Gillies, 'cavalier' (4). When English words were needed to complete the song arrangements that would illustrate 'A visit to the Outer Hebrides and Celtic Music', her first lecture-recital on the subject, we are told that Kennedy-Fraser 'hurriedly concocted "English translations" based on her memories of a few weeks spent as a visitor in a Hebridean island' – as if her hubris knew no bounds (3).

Kennedy-Fraser's own account of this incident is rather different. Before she left Eriskay in 1905, Fr Allan MacDonald had agreed to send the words to the songs she had collected after her by post. Unfortunately, Fr Allan fell ill of influenza and died only weeks after her visit. So when the time came to prepare the songs chosen for inclusion in her first lecture-recital,

...English singing words had to be provided. I had not yet got in touch with Kenneth MacLeod, who later collaborated with me; so, *faute de mieux*, I myself wrote 'The Skye Fisher', 'The Mull Fisher', and others (*A Life of Song*: 90, 92).

Interestingly, Marjory does not call her English texts 'translations' at all. Gillies conveniently overlooks Marjory's self-deprecation, because it doesn't fit the picture she wants to paint of an overweeningly-ambitious and competitive woman animated solely by greed. Let one further passage suffice (3):

Perhaps we should not judge [Kennedy-Fraser and MacLeod] against the ethical standards that determine today's ethnomusicological practice, though the Folksong Society was already producing work of integrity, including that of another Gaelic collector, Frances Tolmie. But previous generations of Scots 'collectors' (notably MacPherson, but also Scott, Hogg and even Burns) had enhanced their reputations and satisfied the public appetite for antiquity and romance by passing off their own poetry – and/or 'improved' versions of ancient fragments – as long-lost examples of 'oral tradition'. And Kennedy-Fraser was sucked into this whirlpool before she'd had time to whisper 'Pelleas et Melisande'.

Anne Lorne Gillies won the Mòd Gold Medal and enjoyed a successful career as a performer of Scottish song. Roger Hutchinson, whose remarks about Kennedy-Fraser clearly derive from Gillies' comments in *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, calls her (in contrast to Kennedy-Fraser) 'a real authority on Gaelic music' (2010: 176). But while Gillies is correct to point out that we should not judge *Songs of the Hebrides* by today's standards, her entire argument proceeds from the assumption that what Mrs Kennedy-Fraser set out to do was publish Gaelic songs as she had heard them from the mouths of the people, and that she dishonestly presented her arrangements as genuine traditional song. Hutchinson expresses the same view when he accuses Kennedy-Fraser of 'making up' some of the songs (2010: 176). Such commentary is as unjust as it is unworthy of both of them; but it is nonetheless an important reflection of how many Gaels (and those who, self-justified by second-language acquisition of Gaelic or by an interest in Gaelic song, like to think of themselves as Gaels) today regard the work of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser and the Rev. Kenneth MacLeod.

So what is the truth of the matter? Do Marjory, the Rev. Kenneth, and *Songs of the Hebrides* really deserve the harsh treatment meted out to them? Or is it time for a closer look at what they did and why they did it?

Songs of the Hebrides

The five volumes published by Marjory Kennedy-Fraser – that is, the three volumes of *Songs of the Hebrides* (1909, 1917, and 1925) plus *From the Hebrides: Further Gleanings of Tale and Song* (1925) and *More Songs of the Hebrides* (1929) – contain a variety of materials, including lively and detailed accounts of her travels and descriptions of island life; theoretical discussion and musicological analysis of Gaelic melody; forty-six prose legends supplied by Kenneth MacLeod, many of them labelled ‘literal translations from the Gaelic’; and some 114 additional tunes and tune-fragments, most of which do not appear in the song settings.

Principally the volumes contain 239 concert arrangements of Gaelic melodies collected in Eriskay, Barra, South Uist, Benbecula, Eigg, Skye and elsewhere in the Gàidhealtachd between 1905 and 1927. Much of this material also circulated as individual items of sheet-music. Whatever one may feel about their intrinsic quality, however they may compare to songs by Schubert, Wolf, and other great European masters of the genre, these compositions were intended to be performed and heard as art-songs, a category that is understood to include ‘folksongs’ when they take the form of ‘concert arrangements with piano accompaniment written by a specific composer.’¹³ Mrs Kennedy-Fraser herself described her intended audience:

Much has been done to re-circulate the songs among the people themselves by the publication of some of them in a cheap form, as, for instance, in the ‘Celtic Lyre’ and the ‘Coisir Chiùil’. The present collection aims at bringing many songs that have never before been published in any form (and a few that have) within the reach of singers who are accustomed to the support of a pianoforte accompaniment.... (*SOTH I*: xvi)

In other words, she was not composing for ‘the people themselves’ but for – to borrow Kenneth MacLeod’s term again – ‘the public’. It is therefore unfair to condemn her compositions for not being accurate transcriptions of the songs as she heard them in the Gàidhealtachd. Art-song has its own set of rules and commonplaces, and she set out to express the melodies she had heard within those parameters. It goes without saying that the result will not satisfy the purist who knows and loves traditional Gaelic song as sung by the Gaels themselves; but how many of those who know and love English folksong have attacked Delius or Vaughan Williams or Britten for creating art-songs based on English traditional material? If Kennedy-Fraser’s compositions are to be condemned as inferior, as having, as Ethel Bassin put it, a ‘period charm’ that had ‘too facile, too voguish an appeal to last’, then let it be so – but let them be condemned on their own terms (Bassin 1977: 143).

The relationship between Mrs Kennedy-Fraser’s tunes and the traditional repertoire of Gaelic singers has, since her time, been extensively studied. John Lorne Campbell and Francis Collinson devote considerable attention to it in their three-volume compendium of waulking-songs, *Hebridean Folksongs*. Ethel Bassin, in her biography of Frances Tolmie, identifies the songs that Miss Tolmie shared with Kennedy-Fraser, or that the latter borrowed from published sources, notably Keith Norman Macdonald’s *Gesto Collection* and his collection of *puirt-à-beul*, to both of which Miss Tolmie had contributed. Today, thanks to the digitisation of taped material recorded by researchers from the School of Scottish Studies, by John Lorne Campbell himself and by the BBC, much of it

¹³ Wikipedia, ‘Art Song’, accessed 10/08/2014.

now available online, it is somewhat easier to ferret out what Kennedy-Fraser must have heard on her travels, and to trace the connections between the traditional material and the concert versions.¹⁴

A detailed inventory of the changes to which the native melodic materials were subjected in their transformation from unaccompanied traditional song to concert art-song is not the subject of this essay. Suffice it to say that a number of principles appear to have been applied:

- The identification of recurring melodic motifs in the native airs, and their expansion and development to reflect the familiar structural matrix of European song-form. For this purpose, Kennedy-Fraser often combined more than one melody, or variant versions of the same melody, in order to produce a rounded-binary (AABA or ABBA) form overall.
- The transformation of native Gaelic tonality – based on modal and often pentatonic scales, and including notes that may be tonally ambiguous – to a tonal system amenable to the tempered tuning of the pianoforte and the requirements of staff-notation.
- The indication of interpretive techniques common in the classical repertoire to emphasize the emotional content of the song – variations in tempo, dynamic contrast (loud vs. soft), and the use of *tempo rubato* being foremost among these – and the assumption that those undertaking to perform these songs would have received classical training in singing.
- The creation of pianistic accompaniments designed to highlight and enhance the emotional values being expressed.
- The simplification and abbreviation of texts, where original Gaelic texts were used at all. While Mrs Kennedy-Fraser believed that if singers would 'learn to pronounce the original Gaelic' they would "find themselves amply repaid for their trouble", she understood that English translations would render her collection accessible to a wider market. All textual reworking – including emendation of existing Gaelic texts, composition of new ones, and the majority of English translations – was the work of the Gaelic editor, the Rev. Kenneth MacLeod.

These principles reflect the aesthetic values and assumptions of the non-Gaelic, mainstream European musical world at the end of the Romantic period – values that are at considerable variance from those of Gaeldom, as expressed in its native song.

In addition, the popularity of the 'Celtic Twilight' trope – encompassing the foggy mysticism; the twee representation of otherworld legends; the liberal application to music, verse and prose elements of a glaze of whimsy (treacle applied as an aerosol spray); the overarching atmosphere of so-called 'Celtic Gloom' – reinforced the popular notion of the fey, impractical, dreamy Celt, and drove Mrs Kennedy-Fraser's compositions even further from what she had encountered in the Gàidhealtachd. Indeed, the atmosphere of the Celtic Revival enveloped the whole undertaking; and one could hazard a guess that Mrs Kennedy-Fraser's work and reputation were too closely bound up

¹⁴ The online database Tobar an Dualchais (www.tobarandualchais.com) contains much useful material, and a great deal more is available for consultation in the Scottish Studies Archives, University of Edinburgh. Even so, the work of identification is not straightforward, as the melodies are too often separated from their original texts which, when present, are a very useful clue. A thoroughgoing examination, now underway, of the restored and digitised wax cylinder recordings made by Kennedy-Fraser on her travels, and their comparison with (1) her manuscript transcriptions and notes and (2) with recordings made in later years from the singing of some of her informants and their descendants, will eventually yield additional evidence of her sources.

with that *Zeitgeist* to have survived its decline in the turbulent first half of the twentieth century in any case.

The influence of the Celtic Twilight aside, however, two other aesthetic factors are of fundamental importance if we are to understand the transformation of these native songs into *Songs of the Hebrides*. First of these is the notion of ‘separability’ – the idea that it is possible to think of ‘tune’ and ‘text’ as separate and distinct elements. This is such a common distinction in mainstream culture that it is taken for granted, but it is irrelevant in the context of Gaelic song. Mrs Kennedy-Fraser was one of many song-collectors in Gaelic Scotland – and Gaelic Ireland for that matter – who failed to recognise the organic inseparability of tune and text in recording Gaelic songs.¹⁵ To Marjory, with her background and education, the distinction of a melody from its words seemed natural, and no doubt explains her focus upon the musical elements at the expense of text.¹⁶ European composers had, after all, long been setting to music poems not originally intended to be sung, and many were also adapting traditional song and dance tunes for use in chamber and symphonic works. Classical instrumental music had, by this time, evolved a considerable distance from its origins in popular culture, and Kennedy-Fraser was certainly not the first to appropriate traditional airs and dress them up for the concert hall.

To a Gaelic traditional singer, however, the separation of a tune from its words is unnatural. John MacInnes has pointed out that ‘the separate concepts of words and music of a song did not exist’ (2006: 218). Even when two or more songs can be said to have the ‘same tune’, the truth is more complex than the simple borrowing of the musical element. What has been borrowed is, in fact, the whole song, with the new words being modeled upon (or even extending) the existing text, conforming in terms of metrical form and structure to the original, so that the new song may carry with it, often quite intentionally, the frame of cultural references and associations established by the original.¹⁷ Thus a musically-gifted visitor from a non-Gaelic background, who may be able to learn the air to a song without learning the text associated with it, may get more credit than he deserves from his Gaelic informant, as the following anecdote related by A. Martin Freeman suggests. Freeman made a collection of songs in Ballyvourney, Co. Cork, but it is clear that the same principle applies among the Gaels of Scotland (Freeman 1920–21: xxv):

¹⁵ In Ireland, the collecting activities of Edward Bunting (1773–1843), George Petrie (1790–1866), and P. W. Joyce (1827–1914) focused upon the melodies, with texts being gathered separately – if at all – and often from singers other than those who had supplied the tunes. For discussion of Scottish collectors in this context, see below.

¹⁶ In a work first published in 1772, John Aikin lamented the decline of poetry as the principal element in the construction of English song in his day: ‘The luxury of artificial harmony, taking place of the simple graces of melody, rendered instrumental music chiefly sought after, and the assistance of poetry in consequence unnecessary. The present age is characterised by a languid, sensual indolence, averse even in its pleasures to anything that requires attention of the mind. The ear instead of being an avenue to the heart, expects to be gratified merely as an organ of sense, and the heroine, poetry, must give place to the harlot, music. And when the latter has deigned to borrow the vehicle of words, she has shown by her choice that she has regarded poetry rather as a burden upon her exertions than an assistant’ (Aikin 1810: 10).

¹⁷ Mrs Kennedy-Fraser may be hinting at an understanding of this process when she writes of a ‘Jacobite Rising Song’ from Eigg: ‘Such *tunes* are likely to be much older than the times and doings commemorated by the *words* – the special Jacobite appeal of the words here having probably ousted the earlier verses’ (*SOTH* III: xiii).

If you tell him that two of his songs have the same tune, he will answer that that is impossible, since they are different songs. If you then say, that the tunes are very much alike, he will agree, and look upon you as a musical genius for having noticed it. “What a marvellous thing” he will exclaim, “for a man who was not brought up in Irish to know so much about our songs!” For the tune without the words is as a voice without a mouth. He thinks that you understand the song (that is, the words) so perfectly, that you have got the tune.

Despite what her musical arrangements might suggest, Mrs Kennedy-Fraser appears to have had some understanding regarding the important interdependency of tune and text. She quotes Thomas Pattison, whose observation echoes that of Freeman (*SOTH* I: xxi):

Of the close correspondence between the rhythm and vowel-music of the words and tunes to which they are sung [Thomas Pattison] says, ‘It is as if they were the twin births of one passionate experience. Sometimes for a few lines,’ he adds, ‘it would almost appear as if it were difficult to say where the music begins and the words end – they blend and fit so wonderfully together.’¹⁸ One may well apply in such cases, the saying of the Breton folk in regard to their songs, ‘Qui perd ses mots, perd son air.’¹⁹

Malcolm MacFarlane, in his address to the Gaelic Society of Inverness, describes the singing of the older generation that he heard in his youth (1929: 253):²⁰

At those old concerts I heard old and new songs;...and although there was little good singing, I never failed to enjoy what I got. There was something within which responded to it. The prevailing style of singing then was different from that mostly heard now. The old Gaelic singers sang so that a listener was able to catch the words of unfamiliar songs and follow their meaning. And their taste in the choice of songs differed from that prevailing to-day. They accorded more importance to the subject and sentiment of the songs, and the art with which the bard expressed himself, than they did to the art of the musical composer as displayed in the tune.

Indeed, it is the text that carries not just the circumstantial significance but also the emotional weight of the song, a fact reflected in the understanding, among Gaels, that a song is not so much ‘sung’ as ‘told’.²¹ In purely practical and functional terms, the text very often dictates the rhythm and structure

¹⁸ Kennedy-Fraser describes Thomas Pattison as ‘the writer on Gaelic song who has best understood the vowel-music of Gaelic poetry in its intimate relation to music proper’ (*SOTH* I: xxi). For the passage she quotes, see Pattison 1890: 126.

¹⁹ ‘Whoever loses the words, loses the melody.’

²⁰ See also note 4 above.

²¹ John MacInnes tells me that his grand-uncles in Skye used to say, ‘Feumar an t-òran *innse*’ (‘The song must be *told*’). He emphasises that this injunction did not refer to the rationale or story behind the song, but rather to the manner in which the song itself should be performed, i.e., with respect and due care for the text (see also MacInnes 2006: 208-9). In Ireland, a similar expression – ‘abair amhrán’ (‘say a song’) – expresses the same concern.

of the performance, accounting for the variability of the musical element from one iteration to another, and for the structural circularity that Mrs Kennedy-Fraser noticed in many of the melodies.²²

Even so, it was the appropriation of tunes in the absence of their texts which led to many of the changes to which critics of *Songs of the Hebrides* have objected. The fabrication of new lyrics, either ‘translations’ or new texts entirely, was seen as essential; and these texts, whether in English or in Gaelic, then contributed to the rhythmical and structural redefining of the chosen melodies – melodies that Mrs Kennedy-Fraser wished her listeners to appreciate as having a particularly ‘Gaelic’ character.²³ Much of the criticism accuses Mrs Kennedy-Fraser of acting as a ‘filter’, and argues that her audiences were not getting Gaelic song (as she would say) *pur sang*, but rather her *interpretation* of Gaelic song, informed by what she had encountered on her collecting trips, but ultimately shaped by her understanding of the requirements of the concert platform.

At this point it seems fair to ask why Kenneth MacLeod, himself a Gael and presumably well able to set Mrs Kennedy-Fraser straight on these matters, did not insist that she maintain the integrity of texts and tunes in the published arrangements. Indeed, today’s critics often point out that ‘he should have known better’. One can only adduce, from the description of his character and from his own pronouncements, that Kenneth MacLeod was as much a creature of the Celtic Twilight as Mrs Kennedy-Fraser herself, if not more so. Whatever his motives may have been, he seized the opportunity to re-work the heritage of the Gael to reflect the artistic tastes of his times. In doing so he followed the well-worn path chosen by James MacPherson and the tiresome multitude of other ‘improvers’ whose re-inventions, confluations, collations, pastiches and outright forgeries, while they have provided deep fodder for generations of academic researchers, have long distracted attention from the richness and subtle beauty of genuine Gaelic tradition.²⁴ Indeed, Alexander Carmichael – one of Mrs Kennedy-Fraser’s sources for textual material – was also at this game; and MacLeod was a protégé of Carmichael.²⁵ The following description of Carmichael’s activities could just as well be applied to MacLeod’s method in producing textual material for *Songs of the Hebrides* (Stiùbhart 2008: 27):

Using his remarkable knowledge of Gaelic tradition...Carmichael set to work on the material he had at hand. It is clear from Carmichael’s manuscripts that

²² In many songs, notably *puirt-à-beul* and waulking-songs, the musical element does dictate the rhythmic character of the songs, and the resulting dislocation of syllables in the text is part of the charm of these performances. Apart from such genres, however, the rhythm of most Gaelic songs is determined by the natural rhythms of Gaelic speech.

²³ With regard to translations, Mrs Kennedy-Fraser acknowledged Cervantes: ‘Did not Don Quixote trenchantly remark that they were like the wrong side of an embroidery?’ (SOTH I: xvi). Unfortunately this observation did not prevent the wholesale re-working of texts in *Songs of the Hebrides*.

²⁴ William Gillies lists a number of ‘creative editors’ who demonstrably ‘gilded the lily’, including ‘John Mackenzie (1806–48) (*Sar Obair*), Rev. Alexander Maclean Sinclair (1840–1923), Professor John Stuart Blackie (1809–95), Revs. Angus (1860–1932) and Archibald (1855–1948) Macdonald, Rev. Kenneth MacLeod (1871–1955) and A. J. MacDonald (1900–75) (*Beyond the Farthest Hebrides*) to name but a few’ (2008: 111).

²⁵ Disentangling the original items Carmichael collected from his own ‘improvements’ and those of his collaborators (like MacLeod) has recently provided the focus for a major study led by Dòmhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart at Edinburgh University; see Stiùbhart (2008).

he was prepared to hone, polish, even rewrite substantial portions of his original material before publishing, smoothing metre, cadence, and rhyme, heightening and refining language, adding esoteric referents, even introducing obscure vocabulary and archaic names in order to enhance the impact which the hymns and charms – and indeed the quotations from the informants themselves – would exert upon the reader of *Carmina Gadelica*.

Stiùbhart goes on to cite a letter in which MacLeod, writing to Prof. W. J. Watson in 1930, confesses to having produced a poem, ‘worked...up from a few stray lines’ of tradition heard in the islands, which Carmichael fully approved and to which he added some ‘touches’ of his own (Stiùbhart 2008: 27).²⁶

It is revealing that MacLeod himself, in later life, sought to distance himself from *Songs of the Hebrides*. In a 1978 review of Ethel Bassin’s book *The Old Songs of Skye: Frances Tolmie and her Circle*, Professor Colm Ó Baoill writes (1978: 142):

Possibly Miss Bassin is a little unfair in naming Mrs Kennedy-Fraser and Kenneth MacLeod together...in some of her strictures: Dr J. L. Campbell tells me in a letter that Kenneth MacLeod...once told him that having worked with Mrs Kennedy-Fraser for a time and seen what she was making of the songs, he wanted to give up, but was persuaded by [Professor Donald] Mackinnon to stay on, lest someone less suitable should be given the work.

Given MacLeod’s own statements and his undoubted enthusiasm for ‘what might be done’ with the songs of the Gael, I am inclined to regard his comment to Campbell as disingenuous. MacLeod was clearly a wholehearted participant in the project. Unfortunately for him, he lived long enough to see *Songs of the Hebrides* come under hostile fire – not least from Campbell himself. I suppose it is understandable that he should wish to shift blame elsewhere, and Marjory Kennedy-Fraser, having died in 1930, provided a convenient target. It is obvious, however, that Kennedy-Fraser herself would have been incapable of the wholesale re-invention of the textual material in *Songs of the Hebrides*, not to speak of the inflated apparatus of legend and lore intended to justify and legitimise the textual confections and re-inventions of both the English ‘translations’ and the newly-composed Gaelic verses. In this context it may be revealing that Kennedy-Fraser insisted, whilst she and MacLeod were proof-reading the pages of the first volume of *Songs of the Hebrides*, that his name appear in connection with the pages of myth and lore designed to authenticate some of the songs (*A Life of Song*: 115):

In September I went up to Straloch to pass the proofs with Kenneth Macleod. We sat on the steps of his church in the sunshine and passed page after page. He was for putting in anonymously the beautiful little tales and legends such as ‘The Christ Child’s Lullaby’ and ‘The Seal-woman’s Croon’, but I insisted that they should be signed; and as he would not do this himself I wrote the name, Kenneth Macleod, at the bottom of each already engraved page.

²⁶ ‘Achan Mathar’, a reconstruction of a ritual prayer, was never published in *Carmina Gadelica*, but may have been intended for vol. 3, which was uncompleted at Carmichael’s death. Stiùbhart calls it ‘one of the more artificial creations’ (2008: 27).

It seems likely that, far from acting as a counter-weight to Kennedy-Fraser's flights of fancy, MacLeod encouraged her to 'interpret' the traditions of the Gael through her own 'racial' (i.e. 'Celtic') consciousness. With the death of Fr Allan MacDonald shortly after her return from Eriskay in 1905, she had lost an important mentor, one on whom she was demonstrably prepared to rely for help with textual material, and whom she would most likely have consulted for guidance as the project went forward. Kenneth MacLeod, while he may have been as steeped in traditional lore and song as MacDonald and theoretically well-qualified to step into the role cast for him, seems to have brought a very different agenda to the work. Why he should for so long have escaped his fair share of the opprobrium so liberally heaped upon Kennedy-Fraser is a mystery indeed.

A second aesthetic difference between mainstream and native Gaelic culture involves the expression of emotion in song. As a product of the Late Romantic musical environment, Mrs Kennedy-Fraser believed that music's function, in song, was to provide a suitable setting for the emotional content of the text, and that it was subsequently the singer's task to deploy a variety of sophisticated musical techniques – elements analogous to paralinguistic features in speech – in order to render that emotional content as explicitly as possible. Thus the dramatic use of dynamic changes, of changes in tempo, the distinction between *staccato* and *legato* tone, the use of various ornamental features and commonplaces – all of these are tools of the trade for trained platform-singers and, indeed, for concert orchestras and chamber musicians in the European tradition. Music on its own – regardless of any underlying text – clearly has the power to express emotional reality that is otherwise ineffable, and Marjory Kennedy-Fraser felt at home in that musical idiom.

Such overtly musical expression of emotion is, however, uncharacteristic of Gaelic singing. For the Gael, a song's emotional meaning is contained in its text; the melody is simply a vehicle for that text, and carries no intrinsic emotional weight apart from its association with the words. As Malcolm MacFarlane put it in his critique of the St Columba Choir, the 'old singers, who mostly sang with animation and feeling, [were] determined to do justice to the words, be the fate of the music what it might.'²⁷ This is not to say that such melodies are not evocative, that they do not haunt the mind; but they do so, for the Gael, in the context of the words with which they are associated. By investing the musical element with its own layers of meaning, Mrs Kennedy-Fraser's compositions proportionately reduce the emotional weight of the text; and by rendering the remaining text – however little, if any, of the original text may have survived the process of condensing, adapting and translating – more difficult to hear and comprehend through the addition of expressive techniques, operatic-style delivery, and piano accompaniments, her arrangements represent a thorough departure from the emotional reality of native Gaelic song.

The close identity between the text of the song and the song's emotional meaning makes traditional Gaelic song very difficult for the outsider to fathom on its own terms. Whatever her own understanding may have been of the symbiotic relationship between music and text among the Gaels, Mrs Kennedy-Fraser knew that her listeners would not be able to grasp that relationship, for the simple reason that the Gaelic texts were beyond their comprehension. The tunes and texts would have to be dissociated from each other; English 'singing words' would have to be supplied; and the emotional significance of the song as a whole would reach the listener not directly, through its text, but implicitly, through its musical setting – a setting created and manipulated by the composer and

²⁷ See above, n. 3.

performer. While Gaels might rightly consider this a grievous loss, it remains necessary to remind ourselves that Gaels were not Mrs Kennedy-Fraser's intended audience.

So to what extent are Mrs Kennedy-Fraser's serious critics (leaving aside the views of her defenders and advocates) justified in their wholesale condemnation of *Songs of the Hebrides*? Does her work contribute anything of value to our understanding of traditional Gaelic song and the communities that sustained it in the early years of the twentieth century? Or must we continue to dismiss – as her critics for the past seventy years and more have done – the entire enterprise as being not only worthless but positively damaging to the reputation of Gaelic Scotland and its musical heritage?

In essence, the critics complained:

1. That Mrs Kennedy-Fraser was unqualified to collect or present Gaelic song, because she herself was not a Gael, did not speak Gaelic, and lacked any sustained experience of the native culture of the Gàidhealtachd.

Obviously, fluency in Gaelic would have been a desirable attribute for Marjory, and she knew this. It may be argued that *Songs of the Hebrides* would have been a very different publication had the Rev. Kenneth MacLeod not brought his own 'improving' agenda to the work. Kennedy-Fraser was not, however, the first person with inadequate Gaelic to undertake the publication of Gaelic song: Alexander Campbell, compiler of *Albyn's Anthology* (1816–1818), was not a fluent Gaelic-speaker and, according to William Matheson, 'his imperfect knowledge of the language resulted in some grotesque renderings of the Gaelic originals' (1955: 73).

2. That the sole – and reprehensible – motivation for the production of *Songs of the Hebrides* was commercial.

Mrs Kennedy-Fraser unquestionably had a family to support, and the success of *Songs of the Hebrides* no doubt made her life more comfortable. However, she was not alone among compilers of Gaelic musical anthologies in having a pecuniary motive. The collections of Patrick McDonald (1784) and Captain Simon Fraser (1816) were aimed at drawing-room performers on the violin and pianoforte; some of the items in the latter collection were Fraser's own compositions. The songs in *Albyn's Anthology* included piano accompaniments, and Campbell clearly hoped for commercial success, as did the compilers of Finlay Dun's *Orain na 'h-Albain* (1848) and later 19th-century productions such as Charles Stewart's *Killin Collection* (1884). Alfred Moffatt's *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Highlands*, containing arrangements for singer and pianoforte of well-known Gaelic songs as well as of newly-composed poems by the likes of Henry Whyte ('Fionn'), appeared in 1907, whilst Mrs Kennedy-Fraser was preparing the first volume of *Songs of the Hebrides*; it, too, was clearly aimed at the drawing-room musician. The only collector who cannot be accused of having a commercial motivation, apart from those whose work remained in manuscript during their lifetimes, is Frances Tolmie. Indeed, people continue to produce compilations of Gaelic songs to this day, and by all appearances they (or their publishers) expect them to sell. The critics, on this point, may have been bemoaning not so much Mrs Kennedy-Fraser's motivation as her success and, indeed, her fame – something which others who have sought to capitalize on Gaelic song have perhaps not enjoyed in quite such lavish measure.

3. That the songs should have been mechanically recorded, using some appropriate scientific method, and that transcriptions of these recordings should have been made available alongside the concert versions.

This criticism reflects a legitimate concern but, apart from John Lorne Campbell, those who have expressed it have neglected to mention that Marjory Kennedy-Fraser was one of the first to bring a recording device into the Gàidhealtachd for the purpose of recording Gaelic song, and did so at considerable hardship. She also transcribed the airs she recorded, and many of these transcriptions found their way into the introductory essays in her published volumes. The absence of texts from the majority of these transcriptions is unfortunate but understandable, given her limited Gaelic. One heartily wishes that the Rev. Kenneth MacLeod had provided her with accurate transcriptions of her recordings while the wax cylinders were still in a fit state to be listened to, so that the original texts could have been printed alongside the airs. MacLeod's stated opinion that many of the original texts were inferior or faulty may account for this omission – in which case, it is he who should be taken to task for it.

4. That tunes and texts should not have been separated during the editorial process, thereby causing unwarranted and lamentable changes to the rhythmic integrity of the music itself.

If it is fair to criticise Marjory Kennedy-Fraser on this important point, it is also fair to say that the separate recording of texts and tunes was a common error. Patrick McDonald's collection (1784) includes 186 'vocal airs' with titles but no texts, and the provision of a piano bass-line suggests instrumental performance (McDonald was a violinist). Elizabeth Ross's manuscript (1812) contains around 100 song-airs, and provides Gaelic titles for these, but no texts. The Torloisg manuscript, an early 19th-century collection made by the MacLean-Clephane sisters in Mull, also gives titles but no texts to the songs noted. Captain Simon Fraser of Knockie's collection (1816) presents the airs as instrumental settings and includes no words; neither does the manuscript collection made by his son Angus. Finlay Dun's *Orain na 'h-Albain* (1848) provides 43 items with English texts, with some fragmentary Gaelic verses. The only pre-1850 collection to provide words in Gaelic was Alexander Campbell's two-volume *Albyn's Anthology* (1816–1818).²⁸ Later 19th-century collections, such as Charles Stewart's *The Killin Collection of Gaelic Songs*, include both text and music, but the airs are clearly modelled on the rhythm of the English words. All of these collections had a dreary tendency to borrow from one another, so the same errors are repeated over and over.²⁹ Keith Norman MacDonald's *Gesto Collection* (1895) and his *Puirt-à-Beul* (1901; Lamb 2012) contain a number of items contributed by Frances Tolmie; Kennedy-Fraser borrowed tunes of Tolmie's from both works. Other works – such as Thomas Pattison's *The Gaelic Bards, and Original Poems* (1890), Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*, and the other major anthologies of Gaelic poetry with which Mrs Kennedy-Fraser would have been familiar, such as Mackenzie's *Sàr-Obair nam Bard Gaelach* (1841), Sinclair's *An t-Òranaiche* (1879), and Watson's *Bardachd Ghàidhlig* (1918) – contain no tunes at all.

On the basis of the example set by such works, not to mention the anthologies of Scottish songs in English and Scots with which her early career would have made her familiar – works such as Robert Burns' *The Scots Musical Museum* (1787-1803) and George Thomson's *Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs for the Voice* (1793–1818), both of which featured chamber arrangements of Scots songs by the likes of Beethoven, Haydn, Pleyel and Hummel – it is hardly remarkable that Marjory Kennedy-Fraser chose the path she did. It would have been remarkable indeed if she had not. And while her

²⁸ For a detailed discussion of all of the published collections mentioned here, especially with reference to this particular shortcoming, see Matheson (1955: 75–82).

²⁹ For a detailed examination of this practice in the context of one Gaelic song, see Blankenhorn (2014).

critics often mentioned Frances Tolmie's collection as an example of how the work should have been done, we need to remind ourselves that Mrs Kennedy-Fraser and Kenneth MacLeod had already chosen the 'artistic' approach over the 'antiquarian' (as he put it) before Miss Tolmie's collection appeared in 1911.

5. That the aesthetic consciousness of the Celtic Twilight enveloped Kennedy-Fraser's production in a foggy miasma of bogus dreaminess and cloying sentimentality entirely unrepresentative of what Sorley MacLean called the 'realism' of the Gaelic poetic tradition.
6. That the work's arrangements of Gaelic song caused actual harm to native Gaelic tradition, as well as 'pain and humiliation' to Gaels.

These two criticisms reflect less upon Mrs Kennedy-Fraser's methods and motivation than upon the aesthetic values of late Victorian and Edwardian Britain. The idea that Mrs Kennedy-Fraser should be held personally responsible for the aesthetic excesses of the Celtic Revival is, plainly, ludicrous; yet from the tone of some of the criticism levelled at her one would assume that she had quite intentionally set out to destroy the tradition and humiliate Gaeldom.

7. That the popularity of *Songs of the Hebrides* led people wrongly to conclude that the dying remnants of Gaelic song had been 'saved' and that no further work needed to be done.

Marjory Kennedy-Fraser was certainly aware that the life of the Gaelic communities she visited was under threat, even in the peaceful years before the outbreak of the Great War. Indeed, she herself suggested the sort of approach recommended by Campbell and Hosking, saying, 'While there is yet time it would be wise to collect zealously in every corner (preferably with the phonograph) that we may save what is fast dying out' (*SOTH* I: xvi). At the same time, she recognized that there was still life in the singing tradition, as when she remarked on the continued vitality of the waulking song tradition 'in isles where the homespun wool is still woven and shrunk by the folk' (*SOTH* III: xvi). And in her autobiography she included the following anecdote:

In Skye in 1922 and 1924 Margaret and I were the guests of Macleod of Skeabost and his lady. We found a number of enthusiastic young men singers there, who sang songs for our recording and who will doubtless do much to keep alive the traditional singing for well over another generation (*A Life of Song*: 141).

So while Mrs Kennedy-Fraser may have advocated the speedy recording of as much as possible, she did not consider that the tradition of singing was already dead, but looked forward to its continued vigour for at least another generation. Nor did she view or represent herself as its saviour. It was some of her over-enthusiastic fans who made that claim, which later critics then wrongly attributed to the lady herself. The fact that misinformation and exaggeration are by-products of fame should come as no surprise to anyone who follows the lives of 'celebrities' in today's tabloid press.

The unhappy reality is that, while Gaelic oral tradition was not quite dead when Mrs Kennedy-Fraser encountered it, its days were numbered. One hundred years after the publication of *Songs of the Hebrides*, those who sing in the traditional style in the islands she visited are few and far between. Younger singers, whether native Gaelic-speakers or learners, derive much of their repertoires from recordings and other published sources. They sing in modern 'trad' styles, use instrumental accompaniments, and sing as part of a career strategy rather than as accompaniment to a day's labour

in a rural community. This situation has come about as a natural and predictable consequence of the tsunami of change that swept away traditional Gaelic society in the twentieth century, and that has facilitated the wholesale assimilation of Gaelic culture to that of the mainstream.³⁰

‘Pioneer work’

Alone among her critics, John Lorne Campbell tempered his criticism of *Songs of the Hebrides* with some acknowledgement of Kennedy-Fraser’s achievements. He remarked that ‘the most interesting part of Mrs Kennedy Fraser’s publications are those portions of the prefaces where a few untouched-up versions of the airs are printed’. He admitted that Mrs Kennedy-Fraser ‘did not pretend that her versions were the original folk-songs’. He pointed out that ‘her descriptive writing on Eriskay, which obviously impressed her very much, is excellent’ and urged us to ‘praise her for her qualities of resolution, appreciation, musicianship and determination to collect her material in the face of very considerable physical difficulties of travel and with only very primitive recording apparatus....’ He recognised that it was not Mrs Kennedy-Fraser herself but her admirers who had pronounced Gaelic song ‘dead’; and he sought to encourage others to ‘follow up her pioneer work’. Some of these comments are surely worth examining in detail.

Cathlin MacAulay, Archivist of the School of Scottish Studies Archives at Edinburgh University, draws the following distinction between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ (‘emic’ and ‘etic’) fieldworkers in describing the work done by researchers at the School of Scottish Studies during the period of greatest collecting activity in the Uists from the 1950s to the 1970s (MacAulay 2008: 159):

The main collectors from the School in the Uists, Donald Archie MacDonald, Angus John MacDonald, John MacInnes and Ian Paterson in Berneray were all, as it were, natives and Calum Maclean became one by adoption. Knowledge of the community gave access to individuals, initiated greater trust and a sense of what was available. And of course speaking the language – Gaelic – was invaluable. The main disadvantage as far as I can see is that the common day-to-day aspects such as a curious anthropologist might have asked relating to domestic tasks such as what time people got up, who set the fire, and other such questions, were not sought. And scarcity of this domestic detail is, I think, particularly apparent in relation to women’s lives.

Unlike the majority of those who later became engaged in active collecting in the Gàidhealtachd, Marjory Kennedy-Fraser brought a female perspective to the task. While the inadequacy of her Gaelic was undoubtedly a hindrance, she was able to count on assistance not only from the Rev. Kenneth MacLeod (once he joined the project in 1908) but also from the likes of Fr Allan MacDonald and his successor, Fr John MacNeill, from Annie Johnston, her brother Calum and others in Barra, from Fr Ian Macmillan in Benbecula, and from many other islanders who, throughout her collecting activities, helped her to interpret not just the language but also the habits and customs of the Gaels. And because she was an outsider, she was not burdened with knowledge that might have prevented her asking

³⁰ Maighread Challan has recently described the traditional milieu in which singing, along with the other diverse activities associated with the traditional oral culture of the Gàidhealtachd, was an integral part of community life; she also described the concatenation of factors that led to the demise of that culture and that community. Challan’s book is in Gaelic; for a review in English that provides a brief summary of the contents, see Blankenhorn (2013b: 140–143).

questions that are of increased interest to us now that we are all – Gaels and non-Gaels alike – outsiders looking back at a vanished way of life.

With the help of such people, Mrs Kennedy-Fraser kept a lively written record of what she saw and heard, much of which subsequently found its way into the introductions to her published volumes and into her autobiography, *A Life of Song*.³¹ These notes reveal a keenly intelligent, well-read and enthusiastic person with an open mind and endless curiosity about the islanders and their way of life. At the same time, they reveal her insight into how the islanders probably viewed her, confessing that her lack of Gaelic was a problem, and acknowledging that she cut a somewhat odd figure, as in the following passage in which she recounts her determination to record a song from an Eriskay fisherman named Gillespie MacInnes (*SOTH I*, xviii-xix; my italics):

[B]y-and-bye the old man came in, and he told me that Gillespie was already out in the boat, which was lying at anchor in the harbour, and that he would be mending nets till midday, when they were to set sail. This was getting serious. I wanted that tune. So I went to Father Allan with my tale of woe, and he listened with a glint of humour and sympathy in his eyes, and said ‘Come with me.’ *I trotted by his side* – he was a tall, spare man – down from the presbytery on the rock to the little harbour, and by the door of the small store...leant Dugald of the post-office and the clerk who attended to the sales. Father Allan gave them orders to take me out in a small boat to the fishing-smack, where we would find Gillespie at his nets. The store was locked at once, the two men got a boat, and handing me off the slippery seaweed-covered rocks in the low tide, rowed me out to the harbour. Gillespie was busy with his nets, and *they chaffed him, I could see, about the strange lady who was running after him for his singing.*

She willingly admits to the occasional blunder, as when, in the spring of 1908, she returned to Barra to try to gather ‘the words of some of the airs which I had collected there the previous summer’ (*SOTH I*: xxvi):

Unwittingly I had gone at the very busiest season of the year, when the herring-fishing and the digging over of the croft-land occupied old and young, men and women alike, and when song-collecting was out of the question till darkness drove the weary field-workers home for the night. Unthinking people, Mrs Maclean at Skallary remarked to me, will tell you that the islanders are lazy; and yet, she said, look round you at this time of the year and you will see that the whole island is dug over like a garden....

Despite her error, Mrs Kennedy-Fraser shows herself able to take advantage of being in Barra during the spring planting to absorb the details of life at that time and record them in her journal.

Kennedy-Fraser’s ability to make friends and colleagues of those she met clearly indicates that the islanders liked and respected her, as she did them. Her approach was collegial, because she knew that she needed help. Here she describes working with Peggy MacDonald, who had come across from South Uist to Eriskay to visit friends (*SOTH I*: xxv):

³¹ Although Kennedy-Fraser reused much of the narrative she had published in *Songs of the Hebrides* when she came to write *A Life of Song*, the latter volume contains additional narrative detail not included in *SOTH*.

She...was storm-stayed with us for over a week, greatly to my advantage, since living in the same house with her I was able to carry on the work of song-noting at all hours, beginning often in the morning before breakfast and filling in moments at odd times till the night was far spent. We were like-minded in our enthusiasm for Hebridean songs, and she listened with the keenest of interest to the phonograph records of songs I had collected from others, swiftly memorizing both words and music of such as took her fancy.

In *The Book of Barra* John Lorne Campbell opined that ‘the methods of her collecting involved formal recitations of a kind that must have been prejudicial to the spontaneity of the singer’ (1998: 223). Probably so; but if this was the case, Kennedy-Fraser was aware of it. The following account, describing a visit to North Bay, Barra, when she brought the recording machine to a woman she had previously interviewed without it, demonstrates her empathetic understanding of the informant’s point-of-view (Kennedy-Fraser and MacLeod 1925: xxi):

This time our singer [Bean Shomhairle Bhig, Mrs Mackinnon] had been forewarned, and...her cottage was crowded with sons and daughters and grandchildren of all ages, and we had a grand *ceilidh*. But her singing lacked the ecstasy of our first meeting. No wonder! Singing into the aluminium bell of a graphophone clips one’s wings.

Campbell would have done well to admit that singing into a microphone isn’t much easier, and that the formality of his own recording technique – audible on the many recordings from his collection that are now available on the *Tobar an Dualchais* website – may have had a similar inhibiting effect.

Kennedy-Fraser’s first journey to remote Eriskay provided the occasion for some of her richest descriptive writing. Today the trip from Edinburgh to Eriskay can be accomplished in a day by car, thanks to improved roads, to Caledonian Macbrayne, and to the causeway between Eriskay and South Uist. A century ago the journey involved a twelve-hour crossing from Oban to Lochboisdale, and a further three-hour journey by fishing-boat which ended, not at Eriskay’s small harbour, but on a rocky shoreline. A further mile of walking, in the dark – it would now have been ten o’clock at night – was required to reach the pre-arranged lodgings. Not bad going for an urban-dwelling woman of forty-eight, dressed in the long skirts of the day!

Once settled on the island, the only means of getting about was on foot – a difficulty whenever the recording machine needed to be transported, as on the aforementioned occasion of recording Bean Shomhairle Bhig in Barra (Kennedy-Fraser and MacLeod 1925: xxi):

North Bay is a good 6 ½ miles from Castle Bay, our headquarters, and it was a grand walk over the rocks by the east side of the Isles, or by choice through the great stretch of sheen-white sands on the west. For my first visit...we were fortunate in finding the singer alone in her cottage. She was, that afternoon, in a state of rare ecstatic musicalness, and she sang us song after song, pouring them forth in such rapid succession that it was impossible to note or even to remember any of them. So we had to turn homeward, vowing to get the phonograph sent on with the utmost despatch. On my second visit, Annie Johnson accompanied me, and while I noted the airs, she wrote the Gaelic words. For we always make a point of getting such words as still cling to the

melodies, whether in the end they prove valuable or not. I had got what I wanted, I had noted all the airs that appealed to me, but I still hankered after that phonographic verification. So, fortunately, just the day before I left the Isles, the phonograph arrived from Skye...and we started out again for a last song-foray on North Bay. We had ordered a little two-wheeled trap to come for us, but alas, it arrived late, with two spokes of one of its wheels run through the tyre! We had to proceed at a snail's pace. I walked for a bit and got a lift in a cart. But the cart turned in to a hamlet, and about half-way a violent rain and thunder storm drove us into the maimed dog-cart, dangerous turns of the road notwithstanding.

The journey back to Castlebay that evening – seven miles through wind and rain – they accomplished on foot, fortified only by sandwiches. The recordings they carried with them, but the dog-cart was useless, and the 'phonograph' machine had to be left behind for collection at a later time.

Mrs Kennedy-Fraser's descriptions of Eriskay and the other islands are, as John Lorne Campbell admitted, excellent. They are all the more valuable as Eriskay in particular was, at that time, not accustomed to travellers from the mainland; indeed, this remoteness was one of Kennedy-Fraser's reasons for choosing to go there.³² She describes the topography of the island, observing that 'the hill in the middle bear[s] about the same proportion to the sloping shores that Arthur's Seat does to the King's Park in Edinburgh' (*SOTH I*; xvii). She describes the house where she stayed, where it stood in its physical environment, and its nearest neighbours and their inhabitants. She describes how the houses were built, how they were furnished, and how the furnishings were used. She describes the islanders' modes of dress, agriculture and animal husbandry. She describes the fishing, in those islands where fishing was possible – in Benbecula it was not – and the work associated with the sea and the shoreline. In effect, she describes the islanders' way of life, and the harsh challenges they faced (*SOTH I*: xvii-xviii):

[O]n this rock, with a little sandy soil in its hollows and peat bog in one part, five hundred souls were making a livelihood by fishing, keeping a cow, a pony perhaps, and a few hens, and by growing little unfenced patches of potatoes and grain, grain which I have seen harvested by handfuls, roots and all. ... No fences, no roads – with the exception of the footpath – no carts, no wheelbarrows even; burdens of all kinds were carried...in creels on the backs of the people, or in panniers on the flanks of the Barra ponies. Sometimes the load would be seaweed for manure, or a particular kind of seaweed which they spread on the rocks out of reach of the sea till, sweetened by the rain and sun, it is fit to be used for bedding, and very good mattresses it makes. The peats, too, had to be carried in creels or in the horse panniers, and heather had to be fetched from a distance as there was none on the island, so boats could be seen leaving in the early morning for South Uist to fetch bracken and heather for thatching; and, returning the same night, men and women could be seen with the laden creels, toiling up the slope with their burdens, and storing the stuff in

³² 'To make sure of fresh ground it was necessary to go beyond the reach of the tourist steamer, beyond that even of the small local plying vessels, and such a spot we found in the little Island of Eriskay, lying far out to the west of Oban, and less known to the outside world than the remote St. Kilda' (*SOTH I*: xvi).

byres, against the needful re-thatching of the cottage roof. At all hours of the day, children, old wives and maidens were to be seen herding, for in an unfenced world everybody's cow was always getting into everybody else's corn, and at any hour an exciting chase might be seen, when some four-footed feeder got into forbidden pasture. Then the boats, with their graceful brown wings, were a feature of the Monday mornings, going out to the fishing, and again, on the Saturdays, returning. Occasionally a boat went round to Loch Boisdale with barrels of fish or the like, and returned with stores; and although every morning Father Allan Macdonald held service in the little chapel on the hill, it was on Sunday mornings that the whole island turned out.

While Mrs Kennedy-Fraser would have made no claim to be an anthropologist or ethnographer, her descriptions stand head-and-shoulders above most of the 'travellers' tales' penned by non-Gaels in the nineteenth century. They provide a richly-detailed record of life in a relatively untouched part of the Gàidhealtachd as it was lived in the peaceful years before the catastrophe of the Great War set in motion the forces that destroyed it forever; and the topics Kennedy-Fraser treats are those that, given that destruction, are most interesting to us now. She describes the native hospitality of the islanders, and how she was welcomed into people's homes, as on the occasion when she visited the home of Gillespie MacInnes and was met by his mother (*SOTH* I: xviii-xix):

[She] came to the door when I knocked, and kindly bid me 'Thig a stigh.' I had enough Gaelic to know that I was asked to walk in.... She sat me down on a low, three-legged stool by the peat fire which was burning brightly on the floor, and seated herself on another. ... The interior of the old hut was really beautiful in the morning light, which slanted down from the small, deep-set windows on the dear old woman by the fire, who did not appear to regard my early visit as an intrusion, but cheerfully and promptly set herself to entertain me. She had no English, and I had little conversational Gaelic, so we sang Gaelic songs to one another, and she was pleased, and with Highland politeness said that I had 'Gàidhlig gu leor.'

She describes what she learned about holidays and holiday customs (*SOTH* I: xix):

Another of the frequenters of the post-office kitchen was Duncan Macinnes, a crofter-fisherman with a big family of bright blue-eyed boys who came to the ceilidhs in the wake of father or mother, and, perched in twos on the corner of any available stool or vacant arm of a bench, drank in with evident avidity the songs and tales of their elders. Duncan had the 'gift,' as the isles-folk put it, of story-telling and of song. He would repeat long Sgeulachdan with a command of breath and rapidity and clearness of articulation that were the envy of all comers. He had a rich store of old world songs and sang me one of the Duanags in which the lads, on Christmas Eve, after an old fashion, chant the story of Christ's Birth. On this night of the year they make a round of visits in the townland, collecting Bannocks of Rye and Shekel. At each house they go through certain mysterious old rites, such as moving three times in a circle

round the heads of the houseman and his wife, carrying a lighted candle the while, and if the light goes out, the augury is taken as a forewarning of death’.

No doubt some of these details Kennedy-Fraser learned in conversation with Fr Allan and others in the island, as she herself was not in Eriskay at Christmas-time. Another priest, Fr Ian Macmillan in Benbecula, provided her an opportunity of witnessing a wedding in that island (*SOTH II*: xiv-xv):

Father Macmillan kept watch through the little gable window that gave on the *machar* southwards. He was expecting a bridal party. Suddenly he exclaimed, ‘Here they come,’ and straightway carried us all off to his little church, and, after the ceremony, to the little presbytery, where we assisted, in the nine-foot-square vestibule, in a festal reel, the piper and the onlookers craning their necks from the adjacent parlours to take part in the fun. After the reel, the customary gunshots were fired, and the bridal party formed up, with a piper at its head, to recross the *machar*, making straight across country some five miles to the bridegroom’s house. And as we drove back in the misty moonlight, by the high-road, we could follow the track of the bridal procession by the sound of the pipes across the moor, and the signalling gunshots that came from each lamp-lit, low, thatched cottage as the bridal party approached and passed.

Understandably, much of Mrs Kennedy-Fraser’s writing describes the occasions for singing, and the function of song in community life. In Eriskay, the postmaster’s house next door was a recognized gathering-place (*SOTH I*: xviii):

Their little clean, sanded kitchen, with its tiny home-made ‘dresser’ adorned with fine old painted bowls and jugs, its two wooden benches along the walls with accommodation below for peats, its barrel of flour topped with the baking board (serving as a kitchen table), and its bag of oatmeal by the fire, was the recognised rendezvous of the island. There everyone was welcomed to the evening ‘ceilidh’, and when word would go round that we were going down in the evenings, there would be gatherings of all who could sing or tell a story.

Because song was an essential accompaniment to manual labour of all kinds, a good deal of Mrs Kennedy-Fraser’s attention focused on its function within the work environment. Here she describes the importance of the waulking process in preserving songs in Benbecula (*SOTH II*: xii-xiii).³³

From the guidwife we got labour lilt *guleor*, with intoxicatingly rhythmic refrains.... These were mostly *waulking* songs, sung at the shrinking of the home-spun web. As this process of fulling the cloth was long and heavy, the songs used for it were correspondingly stimulating. And many ancient airs are still preserved in Benbecula just because the work of weaving still goes busily forward there. A much larger crofter community than that of Eriskay – there were some 1,300 folk in the Isle of Benbecula – hardly a day passes that is not

³³ Kennedy-Fraser was probably well aware of the waulking-song tradition before ever setting foot in Eriskay. Her Gaelic tutor, the Skye poet Mary MacKellar, had in 1887 presented a paper to the Gaelic Society of Inverness (read on her behalf by John Whyte) which contained a long and detailed description of the whole process of cloth production in the Gàidhealtachd. It would be surprising if she had not shared her knowledge with her pupil (Campbell & Collinson 1969: 11–14).

marked by a waulking. And where there are many waulkings there will survive the greater number of varied and complex labour-song refrains. For at these gatherings the singing is the attraction, and the tedious work of tossing, dumping, and circulating the moisture laden cloth is completely forgotten in the intoxicating swing of the body to the rhythmic refrain. The refrains are sung by the whole company, but there is interest also in the verse lines, which are given by the leader only, and which may be either old classics or topical improvisations. ... To this the workers, seated in opposite rows at a long, improvised table, rhythmically swing the cloth tossing it on the boards to the pulse of the song. ... Presumably women themselves were the authors of most of the labour songs used by them.... Many songs go to the shrinking of one web, and these vary in character and speed with the progress of the work.

Indeed, work-songs formed such an important part of the Gaelic repertoire that Mrs Kennedy-Fraser devoted considerable attention to them, and to the social context that sustained them. In addition to several passages in the introductions to *Songs of the Hebrides*, the first two volumes contain a number of separate essays inserted among the concert arrangements, including 'A Note on Milking Songs' (*SOTH* I: 74) and an essay on 'Hebridean Labour Songs' (*SOTH* II: 110), both by Marjory herself. A third essay on work-songs, this one by Kenneth MacLeod and headed 'Songs of Labour' (*SOTH* I: 22), is particularly worth mentioning, not least because MacLeod is, for once, writing in a clear and straightforward style free of his usual precious turns of phrase. In it he provides a thoughtful assessment of the decline of such songs, and the symbiotic relationship between the songs and the labour that sustained them:

In the Hebrides labour and song went hand in hand; labour gave rise to song, and song lightened labour. In this book specimens are given of songs associated with spinning, waulking, milking, churning, and rowing. Apart altogether from their musical value, they are of interest as a characteristic element in a life which is fast passing away. Labour is now being more and more divorced from song, and in the course of a very few years the folk will be surprised to hear that their fathers and mothers once used song as a substitute for steam and electricity! One reason is that labour itself is changing; in its old forms it was suited to song; in its new forms the noise of machinery is its music. The quern, for instance, is never used now except in a case of emergency in the outlying isles, and with the quern has disappeared some of the prettiest Gaelic croons. Likewise, patent churns impoverish equally the lilts and the buttermilk, and once sanitary law has forbidden hand-milking and home-waulking (or, at any rate, 'human' waulking!) the last line between song and labour will have been snapped.

He goes on to provide a detailed description of how the structure and character of the songs reflected the various stages of the work processes that they accompanied. With regard to spinning-songs, he writes:

[T]he long drawn out gradually accelerating phrase culminating in a long pause, is evoked by the periodic rhythm of the spinning itself. The wool is

carded into rolls or ‘rowans’ (Gaelic *rolag*), and the time of the song is really determined by the spinner’s manipulation of the rolls. As a rule, the spinner is singing the verse and the short chorus as she stretches out her hand for another roll, joins it to the end of the spun one, and gets into the swing of the spinning; this done, the wheel and the long chorus go merrily together, gradually getting quicker, till the spinner, prolonging a note, stretches out as far as her right hand can reach what remains of the roll, and then, with a *hithillean beag cha la o hill iù ra bhó*, runs it through to the bobbin.

With regard to waulking-songs, MacLeod provides a very useful summary of the various stages of the waulking process, and the sorts of songs that accompany each stage:

Of the labour-songs which survive, the ones used for waulking, for fulling the home-spun cloth, are the most numerous and the most varied. The theme may be love or war or the praise of a chief, or even a tragedy such as the *Sea-Sorrow*; any song, indeed, may be used for waulking, provided the verse is sufficiently short and the chorus sufficiently long. Many of the old Ossianic ballads have been adapted for the purpose, each line forming a verse, followed by a chorus; the result being that ballads which might otherwise have been lost have been thus preserved, though in every case the diction has been greatly simplified and modernised in the process. There are, of course, different songs for different stages of the waulking, and the stages vary from two or three at a ‘little’ waulking to anything up to twelve at a ‘big’ waulking. The writer has noted the following well-defined stages at Hebridean waulkings within the last twenty years: (1) Fairly slow songs – *òrain-teasachaidh*, ‘heating-songs’ – to give the woman time to get into the swing of the work. (2) Lively songs – *òrain-teannachaidh*, ‘tightening songs’ – to break the back of the work. (3) Frolic-songs – *òrain-shùgraidh* – to give the maidens a chance of avowing or disavowing their sweethearts. (4 and 5) Stretching and clapping songs – *a’ sineadh ’s a’ baslachadh an aodaich* – to make certain that the cloth is of even breadth. (6) The consecration of the cloth – *coisrigeadh an aodaidh*. (7) Folding songs – *a’ coinneachadh an aodaich*... It may be added that, in the case of the frolic-songs, verses were improvised in which the name of each maiden present was coupled with that of her sweetheart, to whom some slighting allusion was invariably made; and the maiden, in her reply was expected to resent this and to praise the slighted one up to the skies.

Many previously-published anthologies of Gaelic song attach legends to individual songs, purporting to explain how they came to be composed. Such stories are, indeed, an important part of the oral record of certain songs. Mrs Kennedy-Fraser followed this practice, and was correct to do so – even though, in the event, some of the stories in *Songs of the Hebrides*, especially those supplied by Kenneth MacLeod, cannot be relied upon. John Lorne Campbell has pointed out Mrs Kennedy-Fraser’s errors in the story she relates in connection with ‘A Bhradaig Dhuibh’ / ‘The Ballad of the

MacNeill of Barra', but the fact that she relates a story at all, and that she credits Mingulay fisherman Hector MacPhie with supplying it, is surely worth noting (*SOTH* I: xxvi):³⁴

This Ballad of the Macneills of Barra is attributed to a Mingulay woman who lived some centuries ago. She was named Nic Iain Aoidh (the daughter of John of the Isles). I was told by a Mingulay Fisher that the tradition runs that she had her 'gift' from the Master of the Black Art. The evil one asked when bestowing it, it is said, whether she would sing to please herself or to please others. Fiercely independent, she chose to please herself. No one, said Hector Macphie, my informant, could endure her singing! But she was victorious in a song-contest between herself and a Uist woman, and this Barra Ballad was the song she sang in Uist itself. At the end of the singing, when the vanquished singer dropped senseless from chagrin, the incensed Uist people would have bound Nic Iain Aoidh. But she escaped from them, ran to the shore where her boat lay moored, drew a knife from her bosom, cut the boat adrift, and was off to Barra before they could lay hands on her again.

Although storytelling was a Gaelic art-form quite distinct from song, Mrs Kennedy-Fraser nonetheless took a keen interest in it. Part of her motivation in visiting Benbecula was her wish to visit Calum Barrach (Macmillan), who she believed was 'a singer of sacred songs' (*SOTH* II: x-xi):

I looked for incantations and hymns and tunes, such as those collected, translated, and published by Dr. Alex. Carmichael in his 'Carmina Gadelica.' What was my astonishment to find that Calum's repertoire, and it was a very large one, consisted entirely of ancient, rhymed heroic tales of pagan origin.... For 70 years (he was then 87) Calum Macmillan had tended his cattle on the *machar* and chanted his tales of the heroes. He was out in the rain herding when we drove over one day, but he came with us to his cottage and courteously ushered us in to the cheerful kitchen. Carding, spinning, and weaving were going busily forward, but at our entrance the guidwife laid aside her carding brushes, her son's young wife her spinning wheel, and the daughter of the house her weaving shuttle to welcome us.

Kennedy-Fraser was astute enough to notice – or wise enough to pay attention when it was pointed out to her – that those able to recite the long narratives enjoyed a status higher than that enjoyed by ordinary singers (*SOTH* II: xi):³⁵

From [Calum Barrach] we heard only Ossianic tales and lays. And ancient custom, we found, did not sanction an easy transition from these to lighter lilts.

³⁴ Campbell points out that 'the name of the traditional authoress of this song is 'Nic Iain Fhinn', 'Daughter of Fair John', not 'Nic Iain Aoidh', as recorded by Mrs Kennedy-Fraser – which in any case does not mean 'Daughter of John of the Isles' (1958: 312). Unfortunately either Campbell or the printer of the *Scots Magazine* made an error here, as his comment – which is fair enough – appears in the context of a critique of 'Kishmul's Galley' (*SOTH* I:80), rather than of 'The Ballad of the MacNeills of Barra' (*SOTH* I: 4) to which the story is actually linked.

³⁵ John MacInnes tells me that this status reflects the importance of the seanchaidh in traditional Gaelic society, who enjoyed a position lower only than that of the bard himself.

At one seance, indeed, attention might be given only to the stuff of heroic tradition, recited and listened to in reverent mood. ... Besides these Ossianic tales proper, the tales of Cuchullan, of the Great Fool (Parsifal?), of Deirdre, tales of suffering, of quest, and of high courage are still recited orally by the folk around the peat fires. This lore was not spoken, it was chanted, and of the forms of chanting used by Calum Barrach, we give one or two specimens....³⁶

Chants were, Kennedy-Fraser recognized, an important aspect of sung performance in the islands. In connection with one of her concert arrangements, 'Sea-Sorrow', she notes (*SOTH* I: 117):

The Air to this song is a form of wailing chant well known in the Isles. The notes of the recurrent refrain are constant, the various members of the reciting phrases are variable and interchangeable, and may be repeated or re-arranged at pleasure. As the old time singers of laments and eulogies were oftentimes bards who improvised under the stress of emotion, they would naturally adapt these traditional chants to the needs of the moment.

She describes the singer who provided the air to 'Sea-Sorrow', a Mingulay woman named Mary MacDonald (*SOTH* I: xxvi):

From her I heard songs of the most elemental character, consisting of mesmerizing repetitions of one short, strongly marked phrases.... In others, again, the repetition of some strongly-characteristic motive holds the thing together, and fascinates and hypnotizes you, the repetitions being strung together on strands of recitative-like sentences, or on more formalized, but still judiciously subordinated, phrases. Such is the chant of the 'Sea-Sorrow' which I heard from her.

In the latter two passages, Kennedy-Fraser could have been describing the singing of Calum Ruadh Nicolson, a Skye crofter and bard who was recorded over a fifteen-year period by a number of researchers from the School of Scottish Studies. Calum Ruadh chanted his poems in improvisatory fashion to variations on a few simple melodic motifs, a process that allowed him and his listeners to focus their attention on the song itself, *i.e.* the words.

As an experienced musician, Mrs Kennedy-Fraser was quick to notice the differences between the musical conventions of the Gael and those of mainstream classical music. One of the greatest of these relates to tonality. She observes (*SOTH* I: xxviii):

[I]n the European harmonic music of the last three centuries, the scale varieties (for harmonic reasons) have been reduced to two (the so-called major and

³⁶ One of Calum Macmillan's chants, 'The Lay of Aillte', became the subject of a concert arrangement, to which Marjory appended a further explanatory note; see *SOTH* II: 80ff. Although this *laoidh* is not one of those mentioned by John MacInnes in his discussion of heroic ballads recorded in the 20th century (2006: 184-210), it appears to have been genuinely collected from Calum Macmillan in the circumstances Kennedy-Fraser described. The investigation of this and other *laoidhean* from Calum Barrach's repertoire, for which airs are given in the introduction to volume II of *Songs of the Hebrides*, may eventually expand our understanding of ballads that would have been in living tradition at that time, but had ceased to be so by the time serious recording got underway some decades later.

minor), the Scoto-Celtic melodic music, on the contrary, still makes use of at least twelve.

Further on she notes (*SOTH* I: xxx):

[S]ome major scales...are incomplete or ‘gapped’. ... These ‘gapped’ scales are characteristic of Hebridean and indeed of all Scots Folk-tonality. ... In their pure form these scales consist of five notes instead of seven to the octave. ... [T]o correlate them with the scales we have been discussing, let us take the modern major scale, and remove its 4th and 7th degrees; we have thus one form of the five-toned or pentatonic scale.... In many Scots airs we find a hybrid form of this scale, a form in which there is but one gap to the octave, *i.e.*, in some the 4th alone is omitted, in others the 7th. ... These examples of partially gapped scales will serve to introduce us to the genuine pentatonic forms which may be said to constitute the tonal basis of perhaps a third of all the airs native to the isles.

She remarks that, even within this modal system, certain notes in a scale are subject to variation at the whim of the singer, and that ‘Folk-song singers...have their own tonal affinities’ (*SOTH* I: xxxii–iii):

One old salt, a Barra fisherman, seemed partial to the Re mode. He was known as the Bard of Bruinish [*recte* Bruernish] and sang the old airs to songs of his own making. He sang air after air to us in the Re mode and (if the evidence of the phonograph be taken) about the Re pitch. In this mode the optional use of B-flat and B-natural [*i.e.* the sixth degree of the dorian or ‘Re’ scale] seems to have been customary alike in Greek and in mediaeval practice, and we find frequent examples of this *transmutable* B in the songs of the isles.

Or this, in which she refers to ‘alternations of the major and the minor third’ (*SOTH* II: xxv):

That the old songmakers could make expressive use of the tonal opportunities of their scales was felt in the *Seal-Woman’s Croon* and others in our first volume. In the present, the *Tiree Tragedy* calls for comment as exhibiting a poignant use of alternations of the major and the minor third.

Kennedy-Fraser appears here to be referring to what the Rev. William Matheson called the ‘variable third’ – a feature that he believes others have chosen to ignore (Matheson 1955: 77-8):

[W]hen one listens to traditional singers, one hears from time to time airs with the variable third. But when we turn to the collections...one looks for this feature in vain. ... Now it would obviously be stretching probability too far to suppose that the collectors just never came across the variable third, after noting down hundreds of items. We must conclude that they did come across it, but either suppressed it or failed to recognise it.

Mrs Kennedy-Fraser neither suppressed nor failed to recognise the ‘variable third’; but by 1955 her work was so far out of favour that Matheson may have felt comfortable not consulting it. Had he done

so, he might also have found himself in agreement with her comment about the inadequacy of written notation (*SOTH I*: xxxiii):³⁷

Unfortunately, all these scales, as sung by the people, differ slightly from anything we can convey by any system of notation as yet in use. If in noting them down and thus trying to preserve them by other than the traditional aural method we sacrifice something of their character in this respect, it is imperative that we go further and compensate for this loss by furnishing them with an instrumental accompaniment.

Whilst we may disagree with the idea that an instrumental accompaniment can somehow make up for the rationalisation of the Gaelic system of tonality to the requirements of tempered tuning, we must allow that Kennedy-Fraser had the honesty to acknowledge the difficulty – an acknowledgement conspicuously lacking in previously-published ‘parlour’ collections of Gaelic songs.

Tonality was not the only musical element subject to variation at the singer’s whim. Kennedy-Fraser frequently notes that Gaelic airs are composed of certain recurring musical motifs which can be re-ordered and recombined as the singer may wish (*SOTH I*: xxii):

The legitimate licence used by some of the older folk-singers takes the form at times of *ad libitum* repetitions of the easily separable motives of a tune....

Indeed, she deploys this insight in defence of her own procedure in producing her concert arrangements (*SOTH I*: xxi):

Another pregnant remark of [Thomas] Pattison’s which shows musical insight is that ‘many of the tunes are to be regarded rather as *germs* of sweet music than as perfect melodies.’ They are indeed but germs, many of them – material with which to work – ‘motives’ capable of elaboration and re-arrangement. And even the present day folk-singers treat them as such, and in the singing of the very old people one can still trace an old time bardic freedom in the use of melody, which should put an end to all disagreements as to authentic versions of this air or of that.

Mrs Kennedy-Fraser argues that it is this variability of melodic elements that gives many Gaelic songs their repetitive, ‘circular’ quality, where it is never easy to be sure where the tune begins and ends. Many waulking-songs in particular illustrate this circularity (*SOTH I*: xxxi):

The songs were almost invariably long, consisting often of many verses strung on strongly characteristic recurrent refrains. They were intended, in the case of labour songs, to carry one over long stretches of monotonous labour. To this end it was essential that they should have an inherent *circular* quality; that they should tend to turn ever upon themselves; that they should appear to end, not at the end but at the beginning; that the last note, contrary to custom, should in

³⁷ D. A. MacDonald (1981), ‘William Matheson’, *Tocher* 5/35: 283-91; Blankenhorn (2013a: 40, n. 6). See also Matheson (1955: 75-81) for some of the problems arising from the inadequacy of staff notation.

its very nature be un-restful and onward-driving, carrying the singer perforce to the inevitable repetition.³⁸

Or this, which Kennedy-Fraser subsequently illustrates with an example from Barra singer Annie Johnston (*SOTH* II: xxiv):

Shuffling and rearranging the order of the traditional formulae or ‘motives’ of the tunes seems to have been characteristic of the free improvisation on themes practised by the hereditary singers, as was also melodic variation within a given framework.

Kennedy-Fraser recognises that waulking-songs, along with *puirt-à-beul*, were most often sung by women (*SOTH* I: xx-xxi):

The chants and duans that were sung on special occasions are still remembered by a few, although the old customs themselves are dying out. If the somewhat colourless music of these chants continues to exist only for the sake of the words, the words accompanying the ‘port-a-beul’, or mouth-music, on the other hand exist mainly for the music. This mouth music for dancing is characteristic and exhilarating in the extreme. ... I can quite believe, as old people have assured me, that this voice-music had a passionate quality exceeding that of any dance-music produced by instruments. Certain women were famed for it, as also for the singing of ‘Orain Luaidh’ (Waulking Songs), and were consequently much in request.

She also states that ‘presumably women themselves were the authors of most of the labour songs used by them’ (*SOTH* II: xiii).

John Lorne Campbell and Francis Collinson have persuasively shown that the meaningless vocable syllables that occur in the refrains of waulking-songs are likely to have had a mnemonic function, and that even when the tunes with which they are associated may be unknown, they can furnish definite clues to the rhythmic character of that music (1969: 227-37 and 1981: 318-23). John MacInnes points out that ‘although they are semantically empty, they seem to have an identity of their own, distinct from that of the verse’ (2006: 213). For her part, Kennedy-Fraser recognises the importance of the vocables, and suggests that the choice of vowel-colour may be significant for purely musical reasons (*SOTH* I: xxi):

In the word-music of this Dance-Song we cannot but feel the musical beauty of the ever-recurrent vowel sound “u” = oo.... Indeed, the use of this vowel “u” in combination with the contrasting vowel “i” = ee ... arises doubtless from a love of colour, as these vowels are much more striking in colour than the broad vowel “a” = ah for example. ... For there is no reason why vocal music should not, in common with instrumental music, express emotion in purely musical terms. In some of the songs we find a preponderance of merely musical syllables with sparsely interjected sentences. ... Much of the intended purely

³⁸ The performance structure of such a waulking-song is examined in Blankenhorn (2013c: 79–80).

musical effect of such songs is lost if words with a definite meaning are used throughout.

In a subsequent comment on the same topic she observes that the ‘reduction of the text to mere vocalising syllables is not necessarily deterioration. Indeed, a higher level of purely musical sense and homogeneity of mood may thus be attained’ (*SOTH II*: xiii). In this, she appears to understand that vocables also function as a counter-weight to the explicit meaning of the text, allowing the listener time to absorb the full significance and emotional content of the words.

All of the above should make it clear that, however we may judge the artistic merits of her concert arrangements of Gaelic song, Mrs Kennedy-Fraser deserves considerable credit for her powers of observation, description and analysis. If the sources mentioned in her introductory notes are any indication, she had read everything she could lay hands on that might have a bearing on her work; and her undoubted reliance upon a number of knowledgeable Gaels – pre-eminently Fr Allan MacDonald in Eriskay, Annie Johnston in Barra, and Kenneth MacLeod throughout – for help in understanding what she saw and heard should not diminish the credit due to herself, for her willingness to observe, to listen and to learn. Her visits to Eriskay, Barra, and the Uists in particular afforded her an opportunity to encounter the culture of the Gàidhealtachd while it yet maintained its characteristic vigour, before the community life that sustained it was swept away by the events of the twentieth century. In the written record of her visits we have a first-hand account that is all the more valuable because it was recorded by an intelligent outsider, rather than by an insider for whom many interesting things might have gone without saying. It seems clear that Marjory Kennedy-Fraser possessed the instincts of what Cathlin MacAulay termed ‘a curious anthropologist’; and it is a pity that this aspect of her work – encompassing her descriptions of the geography and topography of the islands, of the traditional economy and way of life, of individual people and the challenges they faced, of the many ways in which the oral tradition expressed itself in the lives of the people, and of their subtle legacy of song – has been so comprehensively ignored by subsequent generations of scholars, who have allowed their view of Kennedy-Fraser’s work to be blinkered by the virulent criticism levelled at it over the past century by people who mostly had their own axes to grind.

It could be that Kennedy-Fraser’s inclusion of so much anthropological detail in a work designed to sit on the piano in an Edinburgh or London drawing-room itself caused some of the difficulty. Were it not for her descriptions and analysis of what she heard in the Islands – elements never before included in such collections, or never to anything like the same extent – her critics might not have attacked her for what they saw as her ‘presumptuous’ attempt to bear witness to the complexity of Gaelic song, but would simply have dismissed her work as a continuation of the Victorian tradition of arranging Gaelic songs for the parlour performer. It would be ironic if it were the most valuable part of the project, however flawed, that invoked the wrath subsequently visited upon all of her work.

* * *

Art historian Deborah Root has described the relationship between Western culture – the mainstream culture of North America and of Europe’s former colonial powers – and the rest of the world’s cultures, especially those touched by colonial rule, as that of consumer and consumed. While some may argue that the days of colonial governments physically and forcibly extracting human and natural resources from conquered parts of the world have passed, colonial attitudes of ownership and entitlement undeniably remain, manifesting themselves in the assumptions of museum curators and visitors in western capitals (do museums in Mumbai and Lagos contain anthropological exhibits

describing the quaint traditions of English village life?); in the titillating appeal of luxurious holidays to ‘exotic’ destinations; and in the appropriation of the art and culture of non-Western peoples by Westerners seeking to demonstrate their sense of style, their individuality, their open-mindedness, their sense of identity with ‘underdog’ peoples, their ‘spirituality’, their interest in their ancestral roots – or all of the above. Advertisers know that exotic images will attract tourists, sell clothing and household goods (think bed-sheets printed with Inca designs), and enhance the appeal of a bottle of expensive perfume. People tired and disillusioned with mainstream, middle-class life can envelop themselves in ‘New Age’ beliefs; they can purchase a Native American sweat-lodge (portable!) to set up in the garden; they can even train to ‘develop powers of mind and body’ as an Hawaiian shaman. All of these ‘lifestyle’ choices are available to any person with the necessary funds.

The dark subtext to all of this choice is, Root argues, nothing less than cannibalism: the ongoing consumption of non-Western peoples and cultures by the West, without any acknowledgement by the consumer of the historical price – too often the blood price – paid by the peoples whose cultural artifacts are subsequently appropriated and consumed. She writes (1996: 21):

[T]he colonial mentality...can presuppose the right to decide what is valuable and interesting. What this comes down to is the assumption that the colonist possesses the master code within which all data, all people and customs, all art objects, can be assimilated and judged. In this way of thinking it is the colonist – or the museum expert, the anthropologist, the judge at the land claims court – who will decide what is authentic and, by extension, what is worth paying attention to, saving, or stealing. ... The aestheticized appreciation of difference can elide the extent to which the possibility of this appreciation continues to be based on ugly and unequal power relations. It still comes down to a question of who takes and who gives.

Westerners nostalgic for what they imagine to have been a simpler, more authentic time, for the old ways and values of ‘primitive’ societies, are indulging in ‘regret for the loss of aesthetic *styles*, not for the loss of the social, political, economic, and ceremonial institutions on which the aesthetic traditions were dependent and through which meaning was achieved’ (33). In other words, we in the West do not wish to exchange our comfortable way of life for that of a tribal society, however serenely regulated; but we assert our right to co-opt what we consider the attractive aspects of the tribe’s culture for our own use, while remaining entirely in charge of the process. Underlying this assertion is the unspoken understanding – justified or not – that the targeted culture has already died, or is about to do so, and that therefore ‘cultural difference [can] be imagined only as something existing in relation to and at the pleasure of the West’ (33).

Root defines ‘cultural appropriation’ as ‘not only the taking up of something and making it one’s own but also the ability to do so’ (70). She quotes Native North American artist Joane Cardinal-Shubert, who explains the phenomenon in bald terms (70):

Money, that is what appropriating is about. Whether the issue is land or art or iconography or ceremonial reliquia, the focus of the deprivation is money. Something to be gained by imitation, copying, stealing.

Westerners who freely appropriate the products of another culture feel entitled to do so, behaving ‘as if the desired object or images *already* belong to [them]’ (72). She argues that ‘the argument that

appropriation is theft focuses on two points: one, that the people from whom the material is taken are not consulted about the appropriations...and two, that the primary motivation for appropriation is financial, with few, if any benefits accruing to the creators of the material'. (72).

At the heart of the controversy surrounding the work of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser is the question of ownership. To whom do the 'songs of the Hebrides' belong? Who – if anyone – has the right to exploit them for commercial gain? The question of who 'owns' Gaelic Scotland's cultural reliquia is far from straightforward, just as the question of 'who is a Gael?' has become clouded with the demise of linguistically-delimited Gàidhealtachd regions over the past couple of centuries. The situation cannot be reduced to a simple distinction between the dominant culture and the dominated, between Gall and Gael. To answer the question we must ask who indeed is selling, and who is buying, and why.

Since James Macpherson in the eighteenth century, certain educated Gaels have sought to capitalize on their literary heritage, making whatever changes and 'improvements' might be needed to ensure its acceptance within the aesthetic and social values of the dominant culture. Thus if the dominant culture considered epic poetry a manifestation of high culture, then Gaelic must have an epic poem, and 'Ossian' must be hailed as the Gaelic Homer. If the dominant culture regarded song as something to be performed by a trained singer accompanied by a piano, then pianistic arrangements of Gaelic song must be provided. The reward sought for such efforts has been monetary – the ability to sell volumes of poetry or collections of Gaelic-inflected parlour music – as much as it has been to raise the status of Gaelic literature and art in the eyes of the dominant culture. The fact that these 'improvers' have been Gaels themselves and thus rightful owners of the tradition has, as they see it, given them permission to make the changes necessary to effect the desired transition.

The important fact, however, is that these particular Gaels were educated by the dominant culture, and in the process they have – as intended – become to an important degree assimilated to it. They are sophisticated people. They have learned Greek and Latin in school. They are well-read in both Gaelic and English. They are most likely professionals – soldiers, teachers, ministers of the Gospel – who regard the cultural artifacts of traditional, rural Gaeldom with some detachment, as they and their immediate families no longer live in smoke-filled thatched houses, or spend their days harvesting seaweed to fertilize a patch of sandy soil, or grind their own corn, or mend their own fishing nets, or produce their own woolen cloth. From this advantaged position they see an opportunity, as Gaelic-speaking recruits to the dominant culture, of operating on both sides of the cultural divide, appropriating selected items from 'the people', applying an appropriate gloss, and presenting them to 'the public' as genuine tradition. Their own status as native Gaelic-speakers acts as a bulwark against criticism; and the credulity of non-Gaels, who long to experience what they imagine to be the pure authenticity of a society simpler than their own, romanticises their efforts and provides a ready market for their productions.

Macpherson's *Ossian* earned him worldwide fame at the time, and – notwithstanding the efforts of Dr Johnson and other doubters – considerable fortune as well. In respect of commercial success, Macpherson's experience perhaps most closely resembles that of Mrs Kennedy-Fraser a century-and-a-half later. Like Kennedy-Fraser, Macpherson sought and won the acclaim not just of the English and of English-speaking Scots, but that of non-Gaels throughout Europe.

For other educated Gaels, however, the market has always been closer to home. Consider what Deborah Root says about the process of 'deterritorializing' and 'recoding' (85):

To deterritorialize a traditional dance is to remove it from its social and ceremonial matrix, which initially can liberate the practice because it is no longer subject to a system of religious or social authority. People can dance whenever they want. Recoding occurs when a new system of meaning is attached to the newly free cultural form or practice and it becomes subject to that system of meaning. Today the main systems of meaning in culture tend to be organized around money, so we can say that the dance has been recoded by capital. For instance, the folk dance can be taken out of a community – which is to say, detached from its local social and religious context – and performed in a capital city for tourists. Festival clothes become costumes..., a living cultural practice is subsumed under an abstract notion of folklore, and the performance of the dance is inserted into a new system of exchange dependent on cash payment. The original meaning is decoded...and quickly recoded as something else, according to a new system of meaning determined by outsiders with different values and agendas.

Such deterritorialization and recoding have unquestionably occurred, and continue to occur, in the context of Gaelic song. Once Gaels were taught to aspire to a middle-class standard of living and look down upon the traditional way of life of previous generations, it was a short step to recoding the cultural artifacts of Gaeldom, i.e. those items considered worth preserving for reasons of nostalgia. In this fashion Gaelic song was translated from the rural contexts and environments to which it naturally belonged – and with which its social meaning and emotional significance were tightly bound – into a seemly setting such as a drawing-room or a concert hall.

The National Mòd provides an excellent illustration of the process. Originally intended to support the flagging fortunes of the Gaelic language and the survival of native Gaelic culture, the Mòd deterritorialized Gaelic song by providing an alternative venue for it, one deemed more respectable than the rough-hewn environment of a traditional rural community. In this fashion, singing in Gaelic was recoded as something to be done by ‘good’ singers performing for an audience in a public space. No longer was singing something any Gael could – and would – do to beguile the time required to complete a job of work, or to amuse a gathering of neighbours. Rather, singing was an activity for those deemed ‘good’ enough, within the aesthetic parameters set by the dominant culture, to draw an audience of passive listeners who would pay at the door to hear them. Better still, it was turned into a competition – something unknown to Gaelic song in its traditional setting, but which facilitated and supported its recoding, and enhanced its profitability as a commercial enterprise. Gaelic song had become a commodity.

Further commodification was achieved by those who compiled, arranged and published collections of suitably harmonized Gaelic songs; who set themselves up as teachers of singing; who established and led Gaelic choral societies; who adjudicated at the singing competitions and awarded the medals; who arranged the venues for such competitions and concerts; who manufactured and sold the tartan fashion and accessories that competitors came to regard as essential to success; who provided overnight accommodation and sustenance to the large gatherings of people who attended these events; and – eventually – those who produced and marketed audio recordings of the ‘best’ Gaelic singers, i.e. those ‘stars’ who most successfully adapted the traditional style that they had heard from ‘the people’ to the aesthetic requirements of ‘the public’ – the dominant marketplace of

the day. And in this case, ‘the public’ – the market for all of this activity – was, and remains, not the English, nor even English-speaking Scots, but the Gaels themselves, assimilated and comfortable within the enveloping arms of the dominant power. Gaeldom has, in effect, become gentrified; and its cultural artifacts have largely become gentrified, too.

But the Western marketplace is fickle. Today, while the National Mòd remains a popular event especially among families with young children, the type of platform-singing encouraged by the Mòd and exemplified by its most famous Gold Medallists has given way to other styles. Now thoroughly deracinated, Gaelic song is today regularly re-shaped for modern audiences, in much the same way that Mrs Kennedy-Fraser re-shaped it for the audience of her day. Today’s ‘trad’ performers, the heirs of the folk-song revival of the 1960s, turn for the most part to recordings in search of material, either commercial recordings or those lodged in the Sound Archive of the School of Scottish Studies or the online database, Tobar an Dualchais. They reassemble texts from published collections of Gaelic poetry, and they revive songs found in early printed collections. They perform to the accompaniment of instruments, including some appropriated from other, non-Gaelic cultures (guitar, bouzouki, beat-box), once again subordinating the text to the musical setting and often rendering the actual Gaelic words difficult to make out, especially in live performance. Some of them employ vocal techniques and mannerisms derived from other genres, including jazz. Some of them – especially female performers – affect garments evocative of the pre-Raphaelite movement, or of some imagined village life of yore: long skirts, long hair, shawls bearing the images of interlacing serpents, and ‘Celtic’ jewellery. Indeed, many performances evoke the dreamy and mist-shrouded *Zeitgeist* of the Celtic Twilight, heightened by the tasteful application of ‘reverb’. Even some of Mrs Kennedy-Fraser’s concert arrangements regularly turn up in slightly altered garb, although the performers may be unaware of this connection.³⁹

Thus, in the international Western musical genre known as ‘trad’, Gaelic song has become an ingredient used to support the notion that such music is ‘Scottish’ or ‘Gaelic’, although in reality it bears no more intrinsic relationship to genuine Gaelic song than did Mrs Kennedy-Fraser’s concert arrangements of a century ago. None of this matters, however, if the music is commercially viable. As Deborah Root puts it (85; my italics):

The connection between capital and traditional culture, and between the traditional form and the commodified form of culture, is extremely important to the problem of appropriation because *the explicit referencing of a traditional system of meaning is the reason cultural difference sells.*

So where, in this context, are we to place the critics? And how are we to assess Marjory Kennedy-Fraser’s work and reputation, given that they have spent the past eighty-five years under a cloud?

By Marjory’s own account, she was aware that her lack of standing as a Gael was regarded as an impediment. Notice the subtle way in which she seeks to deflect criticism in the following passage (*SOTH* III: xxii):

³⁹ John Purser tells me that when he has occasionally pointed out the Kennedy-Fraser connection to such performers, the most frequent response has been consternation and denial. Indeed, they may have thought the Kennedy-Fraser versions were traditional: as Deborah Root argues, ‘Consumers may imagine that the representation they encounter is all there is to the cultural tradition in question and reject other versions as inauthentic’ (1996: 74). For a taste of some ‘trad’ performances derived from items in *Songs of the Hebrides*, search YouTube for ‘Kishmul’s Galley’ or ‘Cradle Spell of Dunvegan’ or ‘Mhàiri Bhòidheach’ or ‘Maighdeanan na h-Àiridh’.

The work of my own later life has been...to bring some of the art-product of my own race, the Scots Gael, into the market of modern music. ... The airs are faithfully recorded as I found them among the people, and although I re-issue [them] through the medium of my own consciousness, it is the same race consciousness as that of the original composers.

This work was the outcome of a great emotional experience – the finding of myself in my own race surrounded still by the conditions which may have been those of my *forbears*.... From such an experience, one's life receives a dramatic deflection, finds a new centre of gravity....

While acknowledging the role played by her own 'consciousness' in 're-issuing' the songs of the Gael for 'the market of modern music', Kennedy-Fraser asserts her ancestral rights to the language and culture of her 'forbears'. In this, she resembles every North American or Australian of Scottish descent who ever visited Scotland in search of his roots. Both reflect the deep longing of comfortable, middle-class Westerners for some sense of their rural, tribal origins – those places that gave them their surnames and from whence they trace their most cherished myths. In Eriskay and elsewhere, Mrs Kennedy-Fraser found the means of satisfying that craving not only for herself and her own times, but for many like her since.

As we have seen, *Songs of the Hebrides* is indeed a curate's egg.⁴⁰ With regard to the concert arrangements, sorting out the traditional matter from the Celtic Twilight gloss – if that is what we wish to do – is no easy matter. The good qualities of the narrative and analytic writing are easier to appreciate, although even there the gushing intrusion of over-ripe sentiment can at times be hard going. What seems clear, however, is that while Mrs Kennedy-Fraser was hardly the first person to publish 'improved' versions of Gaelic traditional materials, she was perhaps the first non-Gael to do so, and certainly the first non-Gael to enjoy such extraordinary commercial success. As such, she was a tempting target, and the fact that she was a woman probably made her more so.

As regards the critics, some are easy enough to comprehend. The outrage displayed by Sorley MacLean and his contemporaries reflects the anger of those who not only witnessed their culture being appropriated for gain by outsiders, but who were also deeply conscious of the unequal power relationship between their own culture and the one doing the appropriating. While one might wish that these critics had acknowledged that such appropriating had been going on for some time, and by Gaelic insiders to boot, their feelings are easy to understand. Their cultural inheritance was being pillaged by a non-Gaelic speaker (the culpability of Kenneth MacLeod is rarely mentioned), and used as part of a money-making enterprise. What made it worse was the fact that the pillager sugar-coated the material, and at no point acknowledged the appalling treatment that Gaeldom had endured at the hands of the dominant culture (Mac Gill-Eain 1985: 20):

...[W]ith the kind of people who call Mrs Kennedy-Fraser's travesties of Gaelic songs 'faithful reproductions of the spirit of the original', I have no dispute. They are harmless as long as ignorance and crassness are considered failings in criticism of poetry. They have had their hour in the drawing-rooms of Edinburgh and London; they have soothed the ears of old ladies of the

⁴⁰ As Anne Lorne Gilles called it (2005 xxvii, n. 24).

Anglo-Saxon bourgeoisie: they have spoken after dinner, hiding with a halo
the bracken that grew with the Clearances...

It seems likely to have been MacLean's uncompromising language in damning Kennedy-Fraser and *Songs of the Hebrides* that led to the 'common wisdom' of today, espoused by Gaels and Gaelic sympathisers, that holds both her work and herself in contempt.

The other group of critics, exemplified here by the views of John Lorne Campbell, represents what Deborah Root describes as the 'non-Native collectors' whose 'interest can be underlain by the insidious salvage paradigm, which assumes that Native cultures are being overwhelmed by Western culture. In other words, the societies in which...art is produced are again treated as if they were dead' (74). Campbell was concerned that popular enthusiasm for *Songs of the Hebrides* would undermine potential support for his own 'salvage' operations, and although he personally identified strongly with the people and culture of the Gàidhealtachd, his criticism of Mrs Kennedy-Fraser was far less personally antagonistic than it was professional and – to use his own preferred term – 'objective'. His own investment of time and effort on behalf of Gaeldom and Gaelic culture – in learning to speak Gaelic, in living among Gaelic speakers, and in devoting his life to collecting, archiving and publishing Gaelic songs – led to his developing a strong sense of ownership and custodianship of the tradition, and he was unsparing of others who, in his opinion, could have done more to support the cause. In this connection it may be useful to consider a comment made by Marcia Crosby, a North American Native artist (Root 1996: 74–5):

Predicated on the concept of a dead or dying people whose culture needs to be 'saved', those doing the saving choose what fragments of a culture they will salvage. Having done this, they become both the owners and interpreters of the artifacts or goods that have survived from that dying culture, artifacts that become rare and therefore valuable.

It seems reasonable to say, in conclusion, that Mrs Kennedy-Fraser was criticised for reasons that were both wrong and right – or perhaps fair and unfair – at the same time. The critics who savaged her, especially in the early days, lacked the insight to recognise that *Songs of the Hebrides* was part of a continuum of cultural appropriation that began with James Macpherson, a process that has continued ever since, and that has involved Gaels themselves as well as non-Gaels. Now that the memory of traditional Gaelic culture is fading among Gaelic-speakers, the redefining of what it means to be a Gael is well underway, assisted by the efforts not just of today's 'trad' musicians but also of language policy-makers and planners seeking to encourage the renaissance of the Gaelic language among mainstream, urban-dwelling Scots (McLeod 2014). What that will look and sound like – if it comes to pass – we shall have to wait and see. We can be fairly certain, however, that it will not resemble the Gàidhealtachd as Marjory Kennedy-Fraser encountered it on the island of Eriskay in 1905.

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ABBREVIATIONS

SOTH Kennedy-Fraser and MacLeod. *Songs of the Hebrides*.

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