

Singing and the *Dùsgaidhean*: The Impact of Religious Awakenings on Musical Creativity in the Outer Hebrides

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Abstract

The evangelical revivals (known in English as ‘awakenings’ and in Gaelic as *na dùsgaidhean*) of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had an immediate impact upon singing and music-making in Presbyterian communities in the Western Isles as well as a significant long-term effect on both traditional and sacred musical practice and performance. Awakenings often led converts to re-evaluate their participation in traditional music-making and singing, and compelled many to give up their secular music practices upon conversion. Even so, music-making itself was not discouraged, and these religious revivals created an environment which encouraged converts to replace their secular repertoire with spiritual songs and hymns, and to embrace the singing and new composition of spiritual songs to express their newly experienced Christian faith. Converts described how communities exchanged secular for religious songs, and how the adaptation of well-known (secular) melodies to newly composed texts invigorated the musical and the religious lives of their communities.

This article will examine the impact of religious revivals on music-making in the Outer Hebrides – particularly Lewis – and the significant musical shifts which took place within communities as a result. In addition to the adoption of both Gaelic and English-language hymnody, vernacular song composition within revival communities contributed to a sizeable new repertoire. We shall explore what this spiritual song repertoire reveals about the atmosphere of the awakenings, and about the thoughts and concerns of those who experienced them.

Introduction

Gaelic spiritual songs (*dàin spioradail*) and hymns (*laoidhean*), alongside psalms (*sailm*) and Gaelic translations of English hymns, have been integral to musical expression in Hebridean Presbyterian communities for centuries.¹ While many spiritual songs remained in the oral tradition and were never written down, several collections of spiritual compositions have appeared in print. Better known twentieth-century publications include Hector MacKinnon’s *An Neamhnaid Luachmhor* (‘The

In my work as an ethnomusicologist, I have been interested in and inspired by this deep-rooted musical tradition. However, I am aware of the limitations of my research as someone who was not raised in the tradition but discovered it as an adult through personal and scholarly interest. I will be grateful for the understanding of readers, particularly those who were raised in this tradition, and whose knowledge is far greater than mine. I would also like to thank those who have taken time to share with me their own observations and recollections, and to guide me in my exploration of this subject. Finally, I gratefully acknowledge the valuable comments and advice I have received from colleagues, including Professor Donald Meek, Dr Virginia Blankenhorn, and the anonymous peer reviewer.

¹ Whilst *dàin spioradail* and *laoidhean* are often used interchangeably to refer to spiritual poetry and hymns, *laoidhean* is more likely to refer to congregational hymns, and *dàin* suggests individual expressions of sacred poetry and song.

Precious Gem’) and Iain N. Mac Leòid’s *Bàrdachd Leòdhais* (‘Poetry of Lewis’).² Well-thumbed copies of collections by earlier eighteenth and nineteenth century writers Dugald Buchanan, Peter Grant (Pàdruig Grannd), Murdo MacLeod (‘Murchadh a’ Cheisteir’) and John Morison (‘Iain Ghobha’) are still found in many island homes.³ Today the tradition remains central to island spirituality, as John MacLeod noted in 2008 when he wrote that the composition and singing of spiritual hymns ‘may well still be the strongest indigenous art-form on Lewis and Harris’.⁴ Despite the outspoken misgivings of writers including Alexander Carmichael and Francis Collinson – and we shall examine their commentary below – the nineteenth and twentieth century evangelical revivals or ‘awakenings’ (in Gaelic, *na dùsgaidhean*) which took place across the Highlands and Islands were rich in creative musical expression.⁵

Singing of spiritual songs and hymns was central to the awakenings, and some converts took to composition as a way of expressing their new-found faith. Often the song melodies were adopted from well-known secular songs already in circulation within the communities. The tradition of song composition gives a valuable insight into the atmosphere of revivals and the thoughts and concerns of those who experienced them. As Anne MacLeod Hill has persuasively argued, the compositions that emerged and flourished during such revivals have come to constitute an important genre within Gaelic song, *laoidhean dùsgaidh* (‘hymns of awakening’).⁶

The focus of this essay is not so much on the compositions themselves but on the context within which sacred singing and composition took place during the Hebridean *dùsgaidhean* of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. *Dùsgaidhean* that occurred in Lewis, Harris and North Uist during the early-to-mid twentieth century were often accompanied by surges of musical creativity among converts. Between 2018 and 2022, I interviewed several people who converted during revivals, and their recollections of the singing are included here. I have also drawn from some of the 1970s accounts in Colin and Mary Peckham’s book, *Sounds from Heaven: The Revival on the Isle of Lewis, 1949–1952*,⁷ and from the unpublished recollections of the Point awakenings compiled by Angus Campbell in 2022.

Awakenings in Northern Scotland

Awakenings in the Outer Hebrides emerged within the much wider context of the Christian revivals which took place across Scotland and internationally. They led to renewed interest in church attendance, and successfully encouraged younger people to profess faith. There were several spiritual awakenings in Lewis and Harris in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although most were local to specific parishes, some were more influential and captured the attention of the wider community at the time. These include the 1822 *Bliadhna an Fhaomaidh* (‘Year of the Swoonings’) and the 1949–52 Lewis Revival, both of which appear to have started in the parish of Barvas on the west side of

² Eachann MacFhionghain, *An Neamhnaid Luachmhor* (Stornoway: Stornoway Religious Bookshop, 1990); Iain N. MacLeòid, ed. *Bàrdachd Leòdhais* (Stornoway: 1998, 1st ed. 1916).

³ Mairead MacIver, interview, 18 May 2022. Publications include Pàdruig Grannd, *Dàin Spioradail* (Elgin: Peter MacDonald, 1837); Dùghall Bochanan, *Laoidhean Spioradail* (Edinburgh: Mac-Lachuinn & Stiubhard, 1872); and George Henderson, ed. *Dàin Iain Ghobha: The Poems of John Morison, the Songsmith of Harris*. Second ed. Vol. 1. (Glasgow: Archibald Sinclair and Edinburgh: Norman MacLeod, 1896).

⁴ John MacLeod, *Banner in the West: A Spiritual History of Lewis and Harris* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2008), 324.

⁵ Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* 1, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1928), xxx; Francis Collinson, *The Traditional and National Music of Scotland* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 94–5.

⁶ Anne MacLeod Hill, ‘The Pelican in the Wilderness: Symbolism and Allegory in Women’s Evangelical Songs of the Gàidhealtachd’ (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2016).

⁷ Colin and Mary Peckham, *Sounds from Heaven: The Revival on the Isle of Lewis, 1949–1952* (Christian Focus Publications: Fearn, 2004); Angus Campbell, ‘William Campbell and The Point Awakenings 1932–57’ (2022). Unpublished manuscript.

Lewis.⁸ The 1932–57 awakenings in Point, led by the Rev. William Campbell, lasted over two decades, and likewise had significant impact in the surrounding area. In each of these revivals, the spirit of prayer was considered vital to their initiation, even before the arrival of evangelical leaders.⁹

Some awakenings coincided with times of social and economic dislocation. Donald Meek notes that on occasion a ‘national threat to human existence’ was the stimulus for revivals, as in the case of the ‘cholera revival’ in Grantown on Spey in 1832, when people interpreted the outbreak of the disease as ‘a judgement on the ‘lukewarmness of professors’. That epidemic stimulated an awakening under the leadership of the well-known Gaelic hymn composer Peter Grant (Pàdruig Grannd) who, in addition to preaching, led the singing in church services with his violin, and composed songs to illustrate the messages of his sermons; these songs were later compiled into his book of popular spiritual songs, *Dàin Spioradail*.¹⁰ Meek also draws attention to the intense revival movements which occurred in the Hebrides between the two potato blights in 1836 and 1846.¹¹ In the North-East Scottish context, Nadel-Klein and Meek have both suggested links between nineteenth and early twentieth century revivals and poor fishing seasons, when fisherfolk were inactive through lack of work and more open to revivalist preaching.¹² In Lewis, James Shaw Grant, a journalist and the editor of the *Stornoway Gazette* from 1932 to 1963, drew a connection between these awakenings and wider social conditions at the time, writing of the 1949–52 revival that:

I throw out, for what it is worth, the suggestion that there is some connection between these events and the fact that they occurred around the time when unremitting, and largely selective, emigration from Lewis had produced a distortion in the age structure of the population and the balance between the sexes, worse than at any other time in our history, and when the suppression, or attempted suppression, of youth clubs, concerts, dances and all secular activities was at its most extreme.¹³

Evangelism and Communion

In the Outer Hebrides – as across Scotland from at least the seventeenth century – revivals tended to be sparked by the evangelical missions of itinerant preachers. These missions often coincided with the biannual communion season known as *na h-Òrdaighean* (‘The Ordinances’) or *Comanachadh* (‘Communion’). This is a time when Presbyterian churches in each parish host one of several five-day ‘communion weekends’ over consecutive weeks in spring and autumn.¹⁴ All branches of the Presbyterian church – the Church of Scotland, Free Church of Scotland, and Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland – celebrate the communion season in this way. In the past, attendees willingly travelled considerable distances to attend communions, spending weekends in the homes of family and friends

⁸ John MacLeod, *Banner in the West*, 121; Rev. Murdo MacAulay, *Aspects of the Religious History of Lewis Up to the Disruption of 1843* (Inverness: Eccles, 1988), 116; Margaret MacLeod, interview, 6 October 2022; Calum MacDonald, Donalasdair Smith and Nanna MacInness, interview, 17 February 2020; Mairead MacIver, interview.

⁹ Effie MacQuien, personal communication, 27 June 2023.

¹⁰ Donald Meek, ‘Gaelic Bible, Revival and Mission’, in James Kirk, ed., *The Church in the Highlands*, 114–245 (Edinburgh: Scottish Church History Society, 1999), 122–123. Peter Grant, *Spiritual Songs by Rev. Peter Grant, Strathspey*, ed. by Hector MacDougall (Glasgow: Alex MacLaren & Sons, 1926), introduction.

¹¹ Meek, ‘Gaelic Bible’, 137.

¹² Jane Nadel-Klein, *Fishing for Heritage: Modernity and Loss Along the Scottish Coast* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 114; Donald Meek, ‘“Fishers of Men”: The 1921 Religious Revival, Its Cause, Context and Transmission’, in *After Columba – After Calvin: Community and Identity in the Religious Traditions of North East Scotland*, ed. James Porter, 135–42 (Aberdeen: The Elphinstone Institute, 1997), 135.

¹³ James Shaw Grant, ‘Revival that shook up Lewis’ GD005/13/24, *Stornoway Gazette* [n.d.]. MAA2/H/3. Accessible at Tasglann nan Eilean, Lews Castle College, Stornoway, Isle of Lewis.

¹⁴ Donald Meek, ‘The Literature of Religious Revival and Disruption’, in Ian Brown, Thomas Clancy, Susan Manning, and Professor Murray Pittock, eds, *Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature Volume 2: Enlightenment, Britain and Empire 1707–1918*, 360–70 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 361.

when not attending church services. These weekends were characterised by an atmosphere of festivity not unlike that of a traditional ceildh, where hospitality and fellowship would continue late into the night and emphasis was specifically on Bible reading, prayer, sacred singing, and testimony.¹⁵ Kenina MacLeod remembered the special atmosphere of the communion weekends during the Point awakenings in Lewis (1932–57), recalling how people gathered outdoors for singing and prayer:

At communion times, converts from Lochs and the West Side came. New friendships were made. There was a joy and warmth in these friendships, which never died. Those who are still living today who frequented these meetings have never forgotten the atmosphere. I remember one moonlit night a crowd of converts and older Christians, including a Free Church elder stopping on the top of a hill for prayers and singing. Our hearts were so full then!¹⁶

During these communion weekends, special church services were held to prepare both the church and the congregation in advance of the communion service itself. Donald Meek describes the role of the Evangelical clergymen at the communions as follows:

In contrast to the so-called Moderate clergymen, the Evangelicals placed great emphasis on personal salvation, and they also tended to restrict participation in the communion service to those with a personal faith. The communion table was effectively ‘fenced’.¹⁷

The purpose of the ‘fencing’ was to remind intending communicants of the necessity for spiritual preparation. They were not to come forward in a spirit of pride and self-righteousness, but in brotherly love and humility. This process would typically begin with the reading of 1 Cor. 11:23–29, followed by Galatians 5:16–26.¹⁸ Colin and Mary Peckham described the process of ‘fencing’ in detail:

The communion would begin on Thursday morning, which was called the fast day; Friday was the testimony day; Saturday was the day of preparation; Sunday was the great day of the feast; and Monday was thanksgiving day when the final service was held in the morning. It was virtually a convention. Normally two or three ministers would be invited and they, together with the minister of the church, conducted the meetings [...] The table was fenced off or protected when the minister would preach showing, from a Biblical perspective, who should be allowed to partake of the bread and wine. This was normally a searching word. The church would be full but only those who took their seats in the designated area, marked off by white cloth in the front of the pews, would participate. The Biblical position of allowing only those who knew the Lord to participate in the Lord’s Supper was a well-established principle.¹⁹

The preaching of specific individuals has often been regarded as the stimulus for revivals. Some of the better-known revival preachers included Finlay Munro and John Morison (Iain Ghobha) in 1820s Lewis and Harris, Peter Grant in 1830s Grantown on Spey, and Duncan Campbell in the 1949–52 ‘Lewis Revival’ which started in Barvas. D. R. MacDonald, a church elder and precentor in Stornoway, described a time in the Free Church of Scotland in the early 1970s when a localised revival broke out in response to the preaching of one minister, Murdo MacRitchie:

¹⁵ Margaret MacIver, interview. For more discussion see Tom Lennie, *Glory in the Glen: A History of Evangelical Revivals in Scotland, 1880–1940* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2009); Kenneth S. Jeffrey, *When the Lord Walked the Land: The 1858–62 Revival in the North-East of Scotland* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002).

¹⁶ Kenina MacLeod, quoted in Angus Campbell, ‘William Campbell and The Point Awakenings 1932–57’, 8.

¹⁷ Meek, ‘Gaelic Bible’, 124.

¹⁸ Effie MacQuien, personal communication, 27 June 2023.

¹⁹ Peckham and Peckham, *Sounds from Heaven*, 22.

There was times when there was spiritual revival in the community, in my time in the early 70s. After I had been converted, there was a spiritual awakening in the congregation in the Free Church here in Stornoway and it was mainly couples in their late twenties, early thirties, who were converted [...] The minister here then was Murdo MacRitchie. He was from the island and he had been in America and he came here in 1966 from Detroit, and this was '71 and it was just through his preaching. It was a strange thing that the Free Church on Kenneth Street, where James MacIver is today, it was being re-decorated, and they moved the services to the town hall, and some of the older people at that time, they weren't happy that the services were being moved to the town hall, because the town hall then used to have a dance on a Saturday night, and the older people weren't comfortable that a place, a building that was being used for dances just the night before, was then going to be used for worship on the Sabbath. So they weren't happy to go, but it was during that time that this revival happened and it was palpable. You would walk into the service in the town hall and it was like you were engulfed with an electric blanket. You could feel it, and one of the signs was that the people, they were like one. Nobody wanted to leave after the service, they just stood and some weren't able, they were speechless, and there's a conversion [...] And it wasn't just in Stornoway, there was other places, there was over in Lochs and in Ness, and in Callanish where the Callanish stones are, and down in Back too. There was times there around that time where there was a spiritual awakening, and it was just God in his mercy applying his word with power, and to the hearts of the hearers, and them being transformed as a result of it.²⁰

The Effect of Conversion on Song Choices and Repertoires

Until the late twentieth century, Gaelic was the principal language used by revival preachers who, according to Donald Meek, 'drew their inspiration from the Gaelic Bible.' But while the predominance of Gaelic within the church bolstered the status of the language, other Gaelic cultural practices became subject to change as new converts, 'anxious to make a clear and immediate break with their old life and its symbols' replaced them – at least temporarily – with practices more clearly reflective of their spiritual lives.²¹

This break from secularity among converts led to a clear distinction between sacred and secular aspects of community life, and particularly affected the musical lives of the converted. Sometimes such disruption could be nothing less than a lightning shift. During an awakening in North Uist in 1880, one eyewitness described how 'two boys threw their once fondly-cherished treasure – a profane song-book – into the fire of their own emotion, feeling, I suppose, that they were committing their dearest idol to the flames.'²² Alexander Carmichael, in his introduction to *Carmina Gadelica*, recollected at length his meeting with a woman in her home in Ness, in the north of Lewis, in the late 1800s, articulating his disappointment at the lack of any visible folk traditions in the area. The woman spoke of her younger days when 'there was hardly a house in Ness in which there was not one or two or three who could play the pipe, or the fiddle, or the trump.' When Carmichael asked her why this was no longer the case, she replied,

A blessed change came over the place and the people...and the good men and the good ministers who arose did away with the songs and the stories, the music and the dancing, the sports and the games, that were perverting the minds and ruining the souls of the people, leading them to folly and stumbling [...] They [the ministers] made the people break and burn their pipes and fiddles. If there was a foolish man here and there who

²⁰ Donald Roderick MacDonald, interview with author, Stornoway, Lewis, 23 January 2018.

²¹ Meek, 'Gaelic Bible', 141.

²² Lennie, *Glory in the Glen*, 276.

demurred, the good ministers and the good elders themselves broke and burnt their instruments.²³

Carmichael reported similar experiences elsewhere in the Hebrides, such as when he took up residency in Carbost, Skye, in 1861, where he wrote letters describing ‘sources’ of folklore suddenly drying up and informants’ memories having ‘forsaken them in a most unaccountable manner’.²⁴

While Francis Collinson suggests that the act of instrument burning ‘reached its worst during the religious revivals of the early nineteenth century’, such activities did not end at that time. He described how his own mid-twentieth century attempts to collect folk songs and tales in an ‘outlying district of the Isle of Harris’ were met with ‘a complete stone-wall of evasion and polite refusal even to discuss such things as the existence of folk-songs and tales.’ He was unsurprised to learn that a revivalist preacher had recently been active in the area.²⁵

It is important to note that Carmichael clearly had a strained relationship with Highland evangelicalism.²⁶ Donald Meek quotes Carmichael’s view that ‘the clergy – especially the Free Church clergy – are much against *sean sgeulachdan* [“old stories”] and denounce them as “ungodly”, &c.’ By 1888, however, Meek argues that ‘nineteenth-century evangelicalism was assuming more culturally benign forms’, and ‘far from being opposed by Free church ministers, Carmichael was claiming to have gained the sympathy, and the understanding, of two of their leading Gaelic scholars, McLauchlan and Cameron’.

While the lines between secular and religious culture may have blurred over time, what remains clear is that the behaviour of converts, as described by both Carmichael and Collinson, signified a rejection – whether by force or voluntarily, temporary or permanent – of an old way of life in favour of a new one. In this new life, secular music and dance along with numerous other non-religious pastimes had no place.

Neither Carmichael nor Collinson had an interest in what they would have deemed ‘contemporary’ culture. The spiritual songs which we now consider such a strong aspect of Highland and island culture were viewed as part of traditional folk culture when those two scholars were collecting in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were concerned with the preservation of oral material – traditional songs, tunes and stories which were either likely to disappear or were already disappearing from everyday life. Consequently, it is unsurprising that their accounts omitted to discuss the new songs or tunes which may have replaced those that the newly converted had rejected. Neither, for that matter, did they note how a musical shift from secular to sacred was manifesting itself within folk culture in response to revivals.

For some time, the frustration expressed by Carmichael and Collinson coloured the attitudes of other scholars and collectors towards the secular and sacred musical traditions of the Hebrides. Similarly, John Lorne Campbell’s focus on collecting in Catholic areas of South Uist, Eriskay and Barra may have led to a notion that traditions had survived in Catholic islands and not in Presbyterian islands. Maighread Challan has noted that the choices of folksong collectors and scholars in the context of North Uist culture gave a false impression of that island’s traditions. Fortunately, twentieth century collector (and North Uist native) Donald Archie MacDonald and others have shown that, for many people in North Uist and other Presbyterian islands, a strong sense of their traditional culture

²³ Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* 1, xxx.

²⁴ Quoted in Donald Meek, ‘Alexander Carmichael and “Celtic Christianity”’ in Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart, ed., *The Life and Legacy of Alexander Carmichael*, 82–95 (Port of Ness: The Islands Book Trust, 2008), 89–90.

²⁵ Collinson, *The Traditional and National Music of Scotland*, 94–5.

²⁶ See Stiùbhart, *The Life and Legacy of Alexander Carmichael*, for a selection of essays on this topic.

survived alongside their participation in the religious life of their communities.²⁷ As MacDonald wrote in 1988:

It was a sheer delight to find so much tradition alive in North Uist because Calum [Maclean]'s collecting had largely been in South Uist and Barra previously to that. We had been more or less fed by the doctrine that tradition had survived in the Catholic islands and not on the Presbyterian islands and here was all that stuff lying, not as immediately accessible on the surface, but just below the surface from the Presbyterian communities.²⁸

By the time of the mid-twentieth century *dùsgaidhean*, spiritual songs and hymns had become central to cultural expression among converted Christians in the region. Some revival leaders including Duncan Campbell, who led the Lewis Revival of 1949–52, tended to focus their preaching on God's severity. However, many of the songs sung and composed at that time emphasised God's love and forgiveness, and the positive benefits of life as a convert.²⁹ One example is the hymn *Tha an gràdh seo cho Laidir* ('This Love is So Strong'), a spiritual song composed by Christina Morrison of Scalpay (Harris) in the early 1900s, which was among the most popular sung at the time of the Point awakenings between 1932 and 1957.³⁰

Converts spoke of these musical shifts as positive and necessary changes which they themselves undertook because secular songs were no longer meaningful to them. Mary Peckham (née Morrison, 1932–2010), a celebrated Gaelic singer of her time who converted during the 1949–52 revival, related her experience of this:

I wanted to tell people about Jesus. Over the years I had stood dressed in my kilt on the concert platform in Stornoway and sung to the people, thrilling to the 'Encore! Encore!' Then, I had nothing to sing about – now, I had a message! 'Please God, give me the opportunity of singing to them about Jesus and of telling them about this great salvation; and later He did give me that opportunity, from that very platform. I used to weave Harris tweed and I would go to my loom in the shed and would sing as I wove. I became conscious at times that neighbours would gather outside and listen. How I sang then! They must hear this wonderful story of Jesus and His love.³¹

In 2023, Nanna MacInnes recalled her own observations of the shift from secular to sacred singing:

Prior to conversion, we would sing secular songs, in both Gaelic and English. We learned them by listening to tapes and the radio. Following conversion it was the sacred songs, again in both languages. I had never heard them before. They were so beautiful and personal.³²

One story from the 1949–52 revival tells of two Lewis pipers with The Royal Scots who stopped to attend a revival meeting whilst on their way to perform at a concert in Carloway. During the meeting they had sudden conversion experiences which affected them so much that they never arrived at the

²⁷ Maighread Challan, *Air Bilean an t-Sluaigh: Sealladh air Leantalachd Beul-Aithris Ghàidhlig Uibhist a Tuath* (Belfast: Cló Ollscoil na Banríona, 2012), 5–6.

²⁸ Quoted by Challan, *Air Bilean an t-Sluaigh*, 6.

²⁹ Peckham and Peckham, *Sounds from Heaven*, 109.

³⁰ Effie MacQuien and Angus Campbell, personal communication, 28 June 2023.

³¹ Peckham and Peckham, *Sounds from Heaven*, 148. To hear Mary Peckham singing a Gaelic hymn, *Is ann a tha 'n èifeachd am fuil an uain* ('The efficacy is in the blood of the lamb' by Pàdruig Grannd) see Tobar and Dualchais, <https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/23601?l=en>.

³² Nanna MacInnes, interview with author, Crossbost, Lewis, 23 March 2022, and subsequent personal communication by email, 25 June 2023.

concert.³³ Similarly, song composer and future minister John Murdo Smith had initially been reluctant to convert. He spoke of being ‘torn between keeping his promise to play the accordion for Christmas and New Year parties and risking conversion by attending an evangelical meeting.’³⁴ He described the time of his conversion, the first of the 1949–52 revival, as follows:

It was December. I had already made arrangements for the Christmas party we were going to have in the village. I was going to supply the accordion music and all the other friends were to be there, and the thought came into my mind, ‘Well, surely you’re not going to let down your friends after promising to be at the Christmas party and play the accordion. Don’t think about accepting Christ as your saviour, postpone it. After all you’re still a young person. Time enough for religion and Christianity. Perhaps in your declining years when you’ve had your taste of earthly pleasures, but – not yet.’ And this battle was raging within my soul. And then the thought came to me, ‘Well, if you wait for your Christmas party, what if for you there would be no Christmas? What if the Lord would suddenly call you away? Where would you spend eternity if you died unprepared for eternity?’ And that was the deciding factor. There and then I said to myself, ‘Take the world but give me Jesus, all its joys are but a name, but his love abideth ever, through eternal years the same’. When I made my decision, even at that very moment, I felt a great peace flooding into my soul. I felt a great change in my life. I saw everything in a different light.³⁵

Sudden life changes and shifts from secular to sacred music remain common themes in such conversion stories to the present day. Converted Christians describe how secular music no longer appeals to them, while psalms and spiritual songs speak directly to their new-found faith. Scott Cameron, an accordionist and minister with the Church of Scotland, spoke of his conversion as a young professional musician in the late 1980s. Afterwards he stopped playing his accordion for two years because the music no longer held meaning for him. He returned to the accordion a few years later, and now uses the instrument to play both hymn and dance tunes, as he explained in an interview in November 2022:

I grew up passionate about Scottish dance music. I loved Scottish music. Dad played in a band, and that was my dream to have my own dance band, to be on Robbie Shepherd’s programme, to be on TV and have my own band there, and that all happened, you know, it all happened before I was even twenty [...] I just remember we had been playing in the Highland games in South Uist at the time [...] we were down in Lochboisdale, and I remember we were in the hotel there, and now Christianity was about as far from me as anything, but I remember that night the phone rang in the bar, and the barman was laughing and I could see he was speaking to people round the bar there, and they were all just laughing, and I thought ‘I wonder what’s going on?’ And then the barman looked at me and he lifted the phone up and he said, ‘Scott, it’s your mother’ [laughs], and I remember feeling so embarrassed that mum knew to find me in that hotel, and all she said to me was ‘When are you coming home?’ You know, that was her words, and I remember these words haunted me, and we were to go back to Aberdeen to record our second album with the band in Aberdeen, and I never made it to Aberdeen. I was in Skye for two weeks and it was that Sunday night in the Portree church, it was after the evening service I went up to my bedroom then and when I had that experience of the Lord coming, but then that night I was just so filled with the joy, the whole desire to go

³³ MacLeod Hill, ‘The Pelican in the Wilderness,’ 300.

³⁴ MacLeod Hill, ‘The Pelican in the Wilderness,’ 300.

³⁵ John Murdo Smith in *Wind of the Spirit: The Story of the Lewis Revival* (Ambassador Productions, 1994), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lufJz78TWJQ&t=224s> [accessed 24 November 2023].

back to Aberdeen to record and to get involved in the band, I just knew that I couldn't. It wasn't that I didn't want to or I shouldn't do it, it was just my whole attitude changed, and I just wanted to know more of just this joy that I found, and so I actually gave up the accordion. I stopped playing it, and I think it was about two years I left the accordion aside, and then I remember just people used to encourage me, 'Scott, you don't have to give up the accordion, even although you've become a Christian', and I said, 'I know that, I just don't feel ready', but I remember it was two years – I was working in the job centre at the time, and I remember Psalm 40 just came alive, you know, 'I've put a new song in your mouth to glorify the Lord, and he's placed me on a rock establishing my way', and I just felt as if, you know, and I could feel this, 'Scott, I've also given you the accordion', and you know, 'and it's something you can use for me', and so that's when I took out the accordion again and I started playing it for – just as a hobby around the house, I still like the Scottish Gaelic songs and the tunes, but actually it was the hymns that I just fell in love with a lot of these gospel hymns, and then playing the accordion for them and leading, for me that's where I feel at home with the accordion actually, is when I am playing the gospel songs and the metrical psalms.³⁶

Margaret MacLeod, from Barvas, converted at the time of the 1949–52 revival. She recalled how hymns took over from secular songs, but also how secular songs gradually filtered back into everyday life after the revival:

Did you ever go back to singing any of the secular songs?

Yes, when I started teaching in school I had to teach the secular ones, so that was okay. That was part of your work, so that we thoroughly – you know, we enjoyed the secular ones. We listened to them often enough on the radio, but at that time [during the revival] they very much took a back seat.³⁷

Revivals clearly affected the practice of secular music within Presbyterian communities, and giving up secular music, song, dancing and other pastimes was, and is, a standard initial reaction to conversion among committed Christians. However, converted Christians would have exchanged their secular pastimes for what they would have considered a rich social life of fellowship meetings with intense discussions of spiritual concerns, and singing of such power and expressiveness that it would rival any 'secular' occasion.

It is important to remember that only a small proportion of the community ever became communicants or adopted this form of asceticism, and that secular music has, in most communities, co-existed successfully alongside spiritual music. We must also note considerable overlap between sacred and secular song, particularly with regard to the regular borrowing of traditional melodies for new spiritual song compositions.

Singing in Revival Meetings

Meetings – both formal and informal – were at the heart of *dùsgaidhean* in the Outer Hebrides. Formal meetings in churches and houses (sometimes known as 'cottage meetings' or *coinneamhan uaigneach*) were followed by informal gatherings both in homes (*cruinneachaidhean*) and out of doors. These meetings provided key opportunities for singing.³⁸ Mary Peckham recalls how 'people came from all over to these meetings. They came singing and they left singing'.³⁹ In church meetings, psalmody remained the mainstay of musical worship, and psalm-singing was the only form of song practiced in the Free Church and Free Presbyterian Church. Outside formal worship contexts,

³⁶ Scott Cameron, interview with author, Kilmuir, North Uist, 17 November 2022.

³⁷ Margaret MacLeod, interview.

³⁸ Peckham and Peckham, *Sounds from Heaven*, 93–5.

³⁹ Peckham and Peckham, *Sounds from Heaven*, 142.

however, people sang Gaelic and English hymns and spiritual songs, both well-established and newly composed, in addition to the psalms.⁴⁰

Song had long been an essential element of everyday life in traditional Hebridean communities, and this did not change when the repertoire turned to the spiritual. Singing in revivals helped people understand and accept the preaching of the gospel that they heard during the meetings.⁴¹ At the same time, many accounts testify not only to the centrality of such singing to a new-found faith, but to its contribution to a musical soundscape in the everyday lives of those who had been touched by revival.⁴² Donald John Smith described the singing at the shielings, the small huts up on the moors where young people stayed in the summer to tend cattle and milk the cows:⁴³

On a quiet night the singing at the worship in our shieling seemed to echo across the loch. Singing from other shielings wafted through the silence. It seemed to spread far and wide.

Similarly, Alexander MacLeod ('Sandy Mòr'), an important figure in the Point awakenings alongside the Rev. William Campbell, described how he would return home from revival meetings in 1939, sometimes as late as five o'clock in the morning, and go straight to work cutting the peats: 'We used to sing as we worked out on the moor, and the singing could be heard a mile away. It was wonderful!'⁴⁴ MacLeod later became a respected elder in Knock Free Church of Scotland.⁴⁵

Such rich descriptions of the singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs reflect the powerful effect that this music had on people at the time, and suggest that people were captivated by the singing and willingly joined in. Duncan Campbell describes a revival meeting in Berneray, Harris, on 13th May 1953:

I had a powerful meeting down by the shore before the boats left to take the Harris people home, followed by one to help those in distress of soul. How we praise God for being in the midst of revival again. Seeing the people coming over the hills and along the roads, others coming in boats, was a sight to be remembered, and to listen to the singing of Psalm 122 from the boats leaving the shore was soul-inspiring.⁴⁶

D. R. MacDonald describes the singing of spiritual songs in fellowships and house meetings during a revival in the Free Church of Scotland in Stornoway, and the important role that these meetings had for new converts:

Where we would normally have sung them [the spiritual songs] is at these communion seasons for example, when you would go to the surrounding congregations and after a church service there would be a fellowship in homes, and so there used to be house meetings [during the revival] and what would take place at the house would be normally a discussion about the service, people sharing their experiences. They would have tea and that and then they would have a worship service in the house and maybe after that if there were people there who were singers, they would sing some of the hymns and

⁴⁰ Torquil MacLeod, interview with author, Stornoway, Lewis, 25 January 2018.

⁴¹ Anna Swynford, 'Music as Catechesis and Cultural Transformation in the East African Revival,' in *The Changing World Religion Map*, ed. Stanley D. Brunn (Dordrecht, Heidelberg, New York, London: Springer, 2014), 2805.

⁴² For a detailed discussion in Gaelic of singing in everyday life in North Uist, see Maighread A. Challan, *Air Bilean an t-Sluaigh: Sealladh air Leantalachd Beul-Aithris Ghàidhlig Uibhist a Tuath* (Belfast: Queen's University Press), 35–58.

⁴³ Peckham and Peckham, *Sounds from Heaven*, 95.

⁴⁴ Peckham and Peckham, *Sounds from Heaven*, 161.

⁴⁵ Angus Campbell, 'William Campbell and The Point Awakenings 1932-57' (2022). Unpublished manuscript, 4.

⁴⁶ Peckham and Peckham, *Sounds from Heaven*, 70.

that would go on. I mean I was at many of these and I could never do it today but in these dim and distant past days you would be at these house meetings and they would be going on until sometimes two, three in the morning, and you would come home and then you were out to work eight, nine the next morning, and you were like that, every night there would be house meetings in different parts of the island and you would be there, and when I was converted we would have them and we would have sometimes forty people in the house in one night, and they would have these fellowship meetings and then the next night would be in somebody else's house and you would go there and you went on like that for weeks and months on end and you never felt tired! [...] People were alive spiritually and tiredness didn't affect you, and it was an amazing time in the community.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Far from eradicating folk culture, religious awakenings in the Outer Isles have clearly sparked the creative energies of converts, whose engagement with the spiritual song repertoire and in new composition has enriched the musical legacy of their communities. The song tradition has added to vernacular musical expression within the parameters of religious understanding and a sympathetic spiritual community. While awakenings were occasions when secular music lost much of its immediate relevance, spiritual songs which reflected the concerns and newfound faith of the converts became more meaningful. Music was a positive and inspiring element of revivals, and the often sudden shift from secular to spiritual expression highlighted the subjects and concerns which held particular meaning for people at the time. While the recollections of pipers, fiddlers and accordionists who converted in revivals and abandoned their instruments altogether are testimony to the (often short-term) negative impact of the awakenings on secular folk traditions, we can now recognise that spiritual song and music-making have been, and remain, integral to the cultural life of these communities – a phenomenon whose cultural importance can no longer be overlooked.

Spiritual singing and song composition in the context of awakenings have been vehicles for the expression of new-found faith and vernacular religion within a community context. Spiritual song composition, most prominent during revival times, has been a feature of everyday musical life in the islands since at least the nineteenth century. Many spiritual songs remained in the oral tradition; but many others that were never written down or documented subsequently fell from use and were lost. Gaelic and English hymns from compilations such as *Laoidhean Soisgeulach* and *Songs of Victory* likewise have doubtless been influential, but that influence has not been closely examined in the context of the Outer Isles.⁴⁸ While we have gone some way towards exploring the context of this rich and valuable tradition, much research remains to be done.

We have attempted here to assess the role of spiritual song and its cultural and social importance in the context of religious revivals. In a second article, we hope to explore how certain song composers came to the fore during revivals, and how their gifts of composing religious songs and poetry stayed with them throughout their lives. In that essay, we shall focus on the repertoire of the *dùsgaidhean* – not only the psalms, hymns and older spiritual songs, but also the newly composed songs and the composers who emerged from that time.

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⁴⁷ D. R. MacDonald, interview.

⁴⁸ John Campbell, ed., *Gaelic Hymn Book: Specially Adapted for Evangelistic Meetings* (Pollockshields: Glasgow Highland Mission), 1922.

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