REVIEW

Virginia Blankenhorn. *Tradition, Transmission, Transformation: Essays on Scottish Gaelic Poetry and Song. Studies in the History and Culture of Scotland Monograph Series. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2019. Pp. 528. ISBN 978-1788745529. £50.00.*

The accomplished American ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax famously characterized the Scottish Gaelic song tradition as “the finest flower of Western Europe.” There is a massive repertoire of material and it can be enjoyed at a purely aesthetic level, whether in the form of archival recordings of fieldwork amongst native Gaels in rural settings, or in the form of arranged and polished musical products for the global market. Virginia Blankenhorn’s massive volume on the Gaelic song tradition should put to rest any assumption that it represents merely the “rude speech of a barbarous people, who had few thoughts to express,” as Samuel Johnson claimed, or that it lacks the sophistication, diversity, expressiveness, or unsolved puzzles of any other well-developed form of cultural expression.

The eight chapters of this volume—most of which have appeared previously as articles but are here elaborated and interconnected—are arranged consecutively by the themes of tradition, transmission, and transformation, although these topics recur throughout all of the chapters. The dominant mode of presenting, teaching, and analyzing Gaelic song-poetry in the academy (when it is recognized at all) is as silent texts on the printed page. Blankenhorn brings her musical skills and performance experience, informed by deep engagement with both Scottish Gaelic and Irish traditions, to these materials to explore how each of these dimensions can shed light on the others. The results greatly enhance our knowledge and appreciation of their artistic, emotional, and social significance.

The first chapter contains a fresh analysis of song metres, categorizing patterns at different levels of granularity: syllabic rhythm, line types, and verse structures. Blankenhorn originally developed this approach for vernacular Irish (Gaelic) song poetry in a previous volume devoted to that topic, allowing her to demonstrate

the surprising degree of divergence between these two sibling traditions and to speculate on the reasons for these differences.

Gaelic song tradition contains items of many different origins, styles, and functions, and the second chapter demonstrates how a genre classification scheme can shed light on the diversity and functions of the songs from the vantage point of those who sang them in the past.

The vernacular tradition is not confined solely to the cultural expressions made by and pertaining to the Highland peasantry but also contains elements of the high-register versification of the professional classes who were driven to extinction in the eighteenth century with the last vestiges of the patronage system as the native aristocracy were assimilated into anglo-British society. The third chapter investigates the syllabic metres used by the medieval literati and apparently sung, in some fashion, to the accompaniment of the *clàrsach* (wire-strung harp). Her analysis incorporating linguistic, metrical, musical, and performative considerations, informed by experimentation with representative pieces, comes to original and creative conclusions, such as the probability that some metres were defined intentionally to place emphasis on syllables not stressed in speech, thus adding to the obfuscation of poetic utterances as noted by medieval commentators. In the fourth chapter, Blankenhorn subjects William Matheson's reconstruction of the performance of "strophic metre" to careful scrutiny, confirming his working principles.

One of the oldest and most celebrated song-poems in the Gaelic repertoire is the lament composed by Mòr (often anglicized as "Marion") Chaimbeul for her husband Gregor Ruadh MacGregor, executed by her own family in 1570. The song was recorded from a range of tradition-bearers over the last several decades and the fifth chapter examines not just the textual record (since 1813) but also the musical manifestation of the lament, enabling Blankenhorn to propose distinct lines of transmission of the tradition. This offers an effective model of investigation for other such iconic song-poems in the Gaelic canon.

Keening has been investigated in a number of important studies in recent years, although these have tended to focus on Irish and/or medieval sources. Blankenhorn devotes a chapter to this important channel for the female voice in Scottish Gaelic tradition, including

complementary Irish sources, teasing apart the strands of available materials and identifying nuances of its musical dimension, its use to convey and regulate emotional trauma, and its intersections with male-dominant modes of literary expression. Here again juxtaposing text, music, and performance contexts facilitates revelations in this and other female-specific genres.

The interface between Gaelic oral tradition and print-based literature in Gaelic and English is a permeable one, enabling “fakelore” to enter into the repertoire. The seventh chapter traces the evolution and infiltration of one such item, “Cumha MhicCruimein” (“MacCrimmon’s Lament”). Although the chorus is based on a traditional *piobaireachd* song, Walter Scott composed stanzas in English that were later translated into Gaelic, which were then given the semblance of authenticity by being tied to a falsely interpreted episode from the 1745 Jacobite Rising. It is a cautionary tale of the influence of print media and of the myriad ways in which oral tradition can be reinterpreted and reshaped by the expectations of audience and performer.

The final chapter is a re-evaluation of the legacy of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser, who gained notoriety in the early twentieth century for her art-music adaptations of Gaelic songs. Blankenhorn argues that Kennedy-Fraser has been unfairly reviled for her interventions and unappreciated for her valuable ethnographic efforts. There is much ensuing discussion about issues of authenticity and appropriation, demonstrating that they have a longer history in the Gaelic context than might be expected.

This volume marks the slow but continued maturation of Scottish Gaelic ethnomusicology and offers guidance for future work. Blankenhorn is a thorough researcher who has been engaged in this field since the 1970s, so there are few faults worth mentioning. Her critique of James Ross’s classification scheme for Gaelic song (pp. 69–77) is based on the assumption that it is a flat taxonomy rather than a faceted classification system. Although he did not provide exemplars of its application to clarify such ambiguities, he stated his intentions in such statements as “Because of the several important facets of song, the possibility of a plurality of criteria

which takes due account of each of them has to be considered.”¹ His approach of applying independent, multiple criteria remains relevant given the near ubiquity of faceted classification schemes in modern database-driven query systems.

Questions of authenticity, ownership, and appropriation recur in the volume, which is unsurprising given the commodification of culture in the global marketplace and the asymmetric relations between the gaelophone and anglophone worlds. Song-poetry is a crucial cultural resource in current Gaelic revitalization efforts in both Scotland and Nova Scotia, and many of those involved are making a serious and earnest effort to understand and reanimate songs, regardless of the transformation of social and material contexts since their composition. Some of Blankenhorn’s more trenchant remarks about modern singing styles and performance contexts (pp. 147–52, 404–07, 477–79)—not uncommon amongst the “old guard”—may serve to discourage those doing their best on behalf of a highly endangered language whose support systems are strained, at best.

I wonder if beginning the volume with technical aspects of analysis—metres and structures in particular—may overwhelm the non-specialist and if changing the order of topics so as to begin with discussion of the genres, functions, and social contexts for Gaelic song-poetry might have created a less intimidating text.

In any case, *Tradition, Transmission, Transformation* provides compelling case studies of the most important form of Scottish Highland cultural expression, one that deserves to be scrutinized by anyone interested in gaining a deeper understanding of Scottish tradition in its fulness. It would be a real boon if such work could finally draw proper attention to fieldwork recordings of Gaelic immigrant singers scattered in North American archives.

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¹ James Ross, “A Classification of Gaelic Folk-Song,” *Scottish Studies* 1 (1957): 96.