

## MARJORY KENNEDY-FRASER – A LIFE OF SONG

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Marjory Kennedy Fraser was born in 1857, the fifth child in a family with a strong tradition of musical performance<sup>1</sup>. Her grandfather, David Kennedy, was a weaver, precentor<sup>2</sup> in the Kirk at Perth and singing teacher. Her father, another David Kennedy left a career as a businessman in Edinburgh to become a professional singer and singing teacher. His dream had been to sing the songs of Scotland to the Scottish diaspora, already making its presence felt all over the world. Marjory's mother, David Kennedy's second wife, supported him in this decision.

David Kennedy's first overseas tour was to North America in 1867, with his eldest daughter Helen as his accompanist. When Marjory was twelve, having already had piano lessons, she began to learn to accompany her father's singing on the piano.

Every day my father sang with me for an hour, teaching me to read simple accompaniments at sight and to learn to anticipate what the singer is likely to do. It was no easy matter; he kept his renderings so fresh and non-stereotyped. Indeed, I almost had to imagine I was pronouncing the very

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<sup>1</sup> I first became aware of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser in my teenage years when my interest in Scottish music had already formed and I was taking an interest in singers like Kenneth Mackellar. On the back of one of his LP's in brackets beside each track were the words Kennedy, Fraser and Macleod. Not really noticing the hyphen between Kennedy and Fraser I wondered was it just one person, or two or three Years later I became aware that Kennedy-Fraser was the name of a woman who had collected a lot of traditional Gaelic songs from the Hebrides and that Macleod was a man who had helped in the process in some way. The names Kennedy, Fraser and Macleod seemed to occur together frequently on the backs of LP record covers, and indeed even on the labels of 78's. Later on I pieced more of the story together, learning that Marjory Kennedy Fraser had published the fruits of her work in a three-volume collection entitled '*Songs of the Hebrides*' and that Norman Macleod had collaborated in providing English translations for the songs. I was first able to examine a copy of this collection when an admirer in Adelaide who felt she could make use of it gave Jeannie Kelso the complete set. It was while I was reading Clement Hosking's account of his own visit to the Hebrides in the 1930's, *Fine song For Singing, A Celtic Odyssey* (George Dash and co no date c 1951) p.18 that I became aware that Marjory Kennedy-Fraser had left an autobiography. Hosking had acquired a copy of volume one of '*Songs of the Hebrides*' at a time when his interest in Hebridean music was deepening, and he also acquired a copy of that autobiography, '*A Life of Song*', published in 1928, which, Hosking said soon displaced H. Plunkett Greene's "*Interpretation of Song*" from its pride of place as a bedside companion Finding a copy of this book was not easy, but with the help of the internet and a second-hand bookshop in Wales I was able to obtain a reprint of *A Life of Song* published in the USA in 1987. As I read it, a very interesting story unfolded.

<sup>2</sup> A precentor was the individual who led the singing.

words of the song with him on the piano keys before he was satisfied.<sup>3</sup>

In 1870, when Marjory was thirteen, she accompanied her father for the first time in a concert at Lanark. She then acted as his accompanist on a singing tour of Scotland. Her father told her that for the first month he would accompany her, but after that she would have to accompany him, meaning that until she had gained confidence and experience, he would adapt his singing to her playing. After that it would have to be the other way around.

Along with other members of her family Marjory was developing her gifts as a singer, and for ten years until 1881 she was part of a quartet with a sister and two brothers who performed as a backup group for their father.

David Kennedy believed that his mission in life was to *carry the songs of Scotland round the world to all Scots scattered abroad*<sup>4</sup> even though this meant living away from home from 1872 to 1876. On March 6 1872, they set sail on the *Ben Ledi*, a 1200 ton sailing ship, bound for Melbourne, which at that time still hadn't been linked to the rest of the world by cable. They took their own four and a half octave grand piano with them.

Australia was not starved of culture at this time. When the Kennedy's arrived, there was an Italian Opera company performing in Melbourne. The company went bankrupt, leaving some of its members stranded in there. They established a school of Italian singing in Melbourne that, in time, produced Nellie Melba.

The Kennedys performed before large and enthusiastic audiences. Their days were spent in practice and they performed six nights a week for three months. They then began a tour of the Australian colonies that lasted eighteen months. They travelled overland through an Australia that was still very much lacking in roads and railways. The journey from Albury to Wagga-Wagga took two days. The story is so interesting that it is best to let Marjory Kennedy-Fraser tell it in her own words.

The bush, smelling like a chemist's shop, was totally unlike either the woods of Scotland or the backwoods of Canada. Gum trees standing wide apart, the leaves long and thin, turning their edges to the sun, gave little shade; the earth, dry and hard, showed no mossy beds at the tree roots as in Scotland. Through this the bush track was seen ever winding its lonely way. Lonely, yes, except for the occasional swagsman [sic] or new chum making for up country.

The tracks were infested with bush-rangers. These desperate gangs held up travellers and made them disgorge, after the fashion of the old English forest outlaws. The Kelly gang, famous for murder and pillage, was finally caught on a road between Sydney and Melbourne, just a few days before our

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<sup>3</sup> Marjory Kennedy-Fraser, *A Life of Song*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1929) p.10.

<sup>4</sup> Kennedy-Fraser, *A Life of Song* p.14.

route took us over the same track. Kelly himself we saw later at close quarters, caged like a wild beast, behind bars in Pentonville gaol, a few miles out from Melbourne, and we thanked our stars we had not made his acquaintance earlier.

We were a large party to face bush travel. For ordinary travellers there were ramshackle Cobb's coaches carrying the mails, but these could never have accommodated our party. So my father bought a four-horse coach and buggy, and also saddle-horses which we mounted in turns, thus relieving the monotony of long days' driving. If we had a fifty mile day, say, I rode twenty-five on our pony 'Jessie' and Helen the other twenty-five. If there happened a thunder-storm — which was not infrequent — I rode the whole way...Many a thousand mile I rode, often leaping fallen trunks, most frequently with my father by my side, for we were great chums. A relief it was from the bumping of the coach, innocent of springs, over unmade tracks.<sup>5</sup>

Marjorie goes on to describe the hot winds and dust storms, and the experience of being caught in a plague of locusts. They saw few snakes but frequently met Aborigines. Marjory bought an opossum [sic] from a *lubra* [her italics] but it died when they reached Sydney.

Marjory's brother David also wrote a book about their travels in the colonies. Called *Colonial Travel* it described the concerts they gave and the hardships of the journey between concerts.

At eight o'clock, as the shades of evening set in, the audience would begin to assemble. On all sides we could hear the soft thud of horses' hooves on the grass and the jolting rumble of carts. The room soon filled to overcrowding, folk were accommodated in the chimney, on the window-sills, and even on the roof, listening through the open skylights...at ten o'clock, the concert over, the audience would slowly melt away with cart-rumbles, hoof-falls, and phantom flittings as before.

Oft times our arrival at a lonely wayside inn would be a benighted one. From Albury, on the confines of Victoria and New South Wales, we had a hard two days journey to Wagga Wagga. With a start at five in the morning, in the grey dawning, our track wound monotonously through endless sheep-runs. At midday we pulled up at a creek and camped for a couple of hours. After tying the horses to the trees, we would fetch water from the creek, and scraping together chips and twigs, make a blazing fire — the horses crunching their maize, the driver bedding up the fire and fanning it with his old slouched hat. When the "billy" comes to the boil he makes

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<sup>5</sup> Kennedy-Fraser, *A Life of Song*, pp.22-3.

us tea and serves us with hot potatoes. . . A short siesta, then all is gathered up again. The pail and “billy” are hooked to the back of the coach and the monotonous driving figure-S winds again among the sparse trees. The day wears on to the darkening. All ears are on the alert for any signs of life ahead. We are making for Bilabong (sic) Creek. Suddenly a loud eerie shrieking laugh bursts out of the bush on our left. It is only the laugh of the jackass, which in quiet loneliness is echoed further and further off, until it dies in the distance. . . At last the day’s travel is over, only to find that there is no room for the party in the inn and that the male part at least must camp outside. But there, on the opposite side of the Creek, we see the friendly fire of some camping bullock drivers. A shakedown within is found for our mother and sisters, and the others join the camping party by the fire. The short night passes in dreamless sleep; early next morning we are all again on the road.<sup>6</sup>

The journey from Melbourne to Sydney took six weeks. They stayed in Sydney for ten weeks, singing every night. There their brother Robert joined them, which made a party of seven. They sailed to Brisbane and began their overland travels again, in very different terrain to that which they had experienced in Victoria and New South Wales.

We made it a matter of pride, at all times, never to miss a concert date, whatever the obstacles. The unmade bush roads of Victoria had proved manageable, although at times maddeningly exasperating. But driving in Queensland through mud almost axle-deep to reach the goal at a given time seemed an attempt to achieve the impossible. Achieve it we did, however, and I rode in with my father to Gympie township at 7.30 p.m., mud from the hem of my long riding-skirt to the neck of its tight fitting bodice, and yet was with him on the platform in a pink silk frock precisely at eight.<sup>7</sup>

They went as far north as Rockhampton, then travelled back to Sydney by steamer. Eighteen months after they arrived, they sold their horses and went to Tasmania. Whilst there, they were entertained by an old woman called Mrs. Packard, who was the granddaughter of Neil Gow, the eighteenth century fiddler, among whose compositions were the tunes for “Caller Herrin” and Bonnie Prince Charlie”. From Tasmania they went to Adelaide, where they lived on fresh grapes, but could not sleep at night for mosquitoes.

Continuing on to New Zealand, they toured both islands and encountered difficulties in travel similar to those which they had met with in Australia. They then returned to Sydney and Melbourne, before embarking on an overladen ship

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<sup>6</sup> David Kennedy, Colonial Travel quoted in *My Life of Song*, pp.23-4. The original is David Kennedy, *Kennedy's Colonial Travel, a narrative of a four years' tour through Australia, New Zealand, Canada, &c.* (London: Edinburgh Publishing Company, 1876)

<sup>7</sup> Kennedy-Fraser, *A Life of Song*, pp.25-6.

to take them to California, surviving a near shipwreck during a storm in the Tasman Sea. They spent 1875 touring the USA and Canada. In Canada they sang in six towns each week, and two Presbyterian Churches on Sundays. Their four and a half year tour came to an end in St. John's, Newfoundland, where steamers only came once a fortnight. By the time they arrived back in Scotland Marjory was eighteen years old.

By that time several of the Kennedy children were grown up, so that they did not all need to be on tour at the same time. They had all inherited their father's enthusiasm for singing and it was possible for some of them to do vocal studies somewhere in Europe while the others toured. In 1979 Marjory was part of a singing tour of South Africa, while two brothers went to Italy to study, and two sisters remained in Edinburgh with another brother, Charles, who was studying medicine. The South African tour followed the same pattern as previous ones, but the travel does not appear to have been as difficult as it had been in Australia and New Zealand.

The brothers in Italy stayed for two years. Whilst there, they were engaged to perform in *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Then they all reassembled in Edinburgh and re-divided, with the concert party going to India without Marjory, who went to Italy with her brothers to study.

I elected to work with an old ex-opera singer, Signora Gambardella, who in her girlhood in Bologna had studied with the famous composer Rossini. That he knew well the voice and its possibilities and limitations, his operas prove up to the hilt. His world of song was a world of bel canto. Old Gambardella, brought up in that world of beauty of tone, came daily to the flat, as was the old Italian fashion, and gave me a lesson of at least an hour and a half. She adored and detested me in turn. Lost in wonder at my musicianship – I could actually transpose at the piano at sight, a rare accomplishment with the Italian singer, apparently – she was equally horrified by my lack of appreciation of the kind of tone she wanted from me on certain notes. They all, the continental teachers, treated me as a soprano – I sang the Sonnambula music with Gambardella – whereas I believe I was neither a soprano or a contralto but rather a high tenor. Be that as it may, I got my score thrown at my head quite frequently, and once in her uncontrollable wrath the maestra tore a tortoiseshell comb out of my hair and threw it to the opposite wall. Ah, the singing students of today know not what we endured fifty years ago. But how earnest they were, those old Italian voice producers.<sup>8</sup>

Then the Kennedy family was hit by tragedy. Having returned to Scotland three other members of the family, James, Kate and Lizzie, were now going to study in Italy. Lamperti, the *maestro* with whom they were going to work was to be in Nice, so they joined him there. One night after they had taken their seats in

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<sup>8</sup> Kennedy-Fraser, *A Life of Song*, p.56.

a theatre the building caught fire and they died, as did many others. They were buried at the English cemetery at Nice.

Despite the shock of this accident the singing tours continued. Marjory accompanied her father and other members of the family to America and Canada again, before undertaking further study in Paris with a renowned singing teacher, Mathilde Marchesi.

Marjory was not impressed with Mathilde Marchesi as a teacher. But it was after she had returned to Scotland from the polyglot circles in which she had been moving in Paris that she first asked herself why she had never tried to sing in her grandfather's native tongue. Her maternal grandfather, Charles Fraser, had spoken only Gaelic in his youth, but he belonged to a generation that had been conditioned to think of Gaelic as an inferior language, so he was of no help.

During a singing tour of Scotland in 1882 she met a man who could read Gaelic well enough to be able to help her with pronunciation, and at last, with her sisters Helen and Margaret, began to incorporate some Gaelic songs into the family repertoire. With Helen and Margaret she began lessons with the Gaelic poetess, Mary Mackellar whenever they were in Edinburgh, both in the language and in the songs.

Between 1883 and 1886 they managed to fit in further tours of Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Robert Kennedy married an Australian girl and settled in Melbourne, becoming a singer and a singing teacher in that city. While they were in Melbourne they heard Nellie Melba sing, before Melba went to Paris to study under Mathilde Marchesi. While they were in Canada Marjory's father, David Kennedy died. His body was taken back to Edinburgh to be buried.

By this time Marjory was engaged to Alec Yule Fraser, a young cousin of her mother's whom she had met four years earlier. Alec Fraser was a science teacher, a graduate of Aberdeen University. He taught in various schools in Edinburgh before becoming, at the age of thirty-two, Headmaster of a school in Glasgow. The Glasgow air, according to Marjorie, did not agree with him, and he succumbed to pneumonia and died in 1890, three years after they were married.

Two children were born to the marriage, David and Patuffa. David, of course, was named after Marjory's father, and Patuffa acquired her name from a friend Marjory had made while she was in Milan. This friend, an Irishwoman, was visiting her in Edinburgh just after the baby was born. She called the baby Madama Patuffa as she held it in her arms, and the name stuck.

Over a period of almost twenty years Marjory's interest Gaelic song deepened and she was also gathering the expertise that would later enable her to bring this music to the attention of a wider public. From the late 1880s she was running a series of lecture-recitals in Edinburgh each year on the subject of Celtic Music, drawing on examples from Ireland, Wales, Cornwall, Brittany and the Isle of Man as well as from Scotland. She became familiar with the work of

other researchers. The Professor of Musical History at the Paris Conservatoire, Bourgault Ducoudray, had recently published a collection of Breton airs. He had gone to Brittany with an interpreter and a Breton amanuensis to note the music and write the words down. This followed the precedent of Maria Jane Williams, who, in the 1820s went from cottage to cottage in the part of South Wales where she lived, carefully noting the words and tunes of the songs the Welsh-speaking peasantry were singing, and publishing these songs in a printed collection which is still the basis of much of present day knowledge of Welsh song. In 1885 the idea came into Marjory's head that she might be able to do the same with the music of the Scots Gaels but ten years went by before she was could do anything about it.

In 1903 an acquaintance of Marjory's, a Scots painter called John Duncan, had returned from lecturing on Celtic Art in Chicago. Fired with the ambition to master Gaelic he visited Eriskay and wrote to Marjory to tell her that Eriskay was where she should go for the work she had in mind. She could not go that year.

But in 1905 I ventured. It was then rather a formidable decision. Any degree of comfort on the journey – or on arrival – was uncertain. The certain discomfort went without saying. The island itself was a mystery and the getting away again a problem. But having been early inured to the hardships that beset the traveler ere railways and luxurious steamers opened up his way, I after a few misgivings – my son says I made up my mind about a dozen times to go and unmade it again as often – I at last faced it: so one night, in the beginning of August...I dressed in what comfortable warm old clothing I could lay my hands on, taking with me only what I could carry in my hand, and left by the night train for Oban. I little thought, as I left by that night train from Edinburgh and got on board the little steamer sailing from Oban at six in the morning, that I was sailing into a world that would hold me in its grip for the rest of my life. Wet, sick and weary – the Minch resents intruders – I stepped off the little steamer on to the Lochboisdale Pier, where John Duncan and his friend Dr. Taylor were awaiting me. They hurried me, in a dreary drizzle of rain, into an open fishing boat that was leaving at once for the isle; and I shared with them the remainder of the lunch I had brought with me from home – Vienna roll and cream cheese, while the boatmen brought me some tea, bitter, strong and black.

We were landed about a mile from the house that was to receive us – the only modern house in the Isle, save those of the schoolmaster and the priest – and I was seated at supper by about 9 o'clock. I had hardly drawn breath when John Duncan brought me a little girl, Mary McInnes, who sat on my knee and sang Island songs to me. In a little over twenty-four hours I had sailed, I felt, out of the twentieth century back at least into the 1600's<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Kennedy-Fraser, *A Life of Song* p. 95-6.

At the time of Marjory's first visit to Eriskay the post only came once a week and there was no cable communication. Marjory could sing in Gaelic, but her conversational Gaelic was very limited. One morning she realized that a song she had heard a young fisherman singing had not yet been noted down and she was due to leave the island before he returned from a fishing trip he was about to set out on that very morning:

There was no time to be lost. I set out before breakfast to his mother's house, a long, oblong, old-fashioned hut standing back from the beach where Prince Charlie landed in 1745...Gillespie's mother came to the door when I knocked and kindly bade 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. I had learnt by the experience of semi-suffocation to prefer those low stools to the high deal chair which was always politely brought from behind the partition for the stranger's use. On the low stool one was free from the smoke, which when it had reached a certain height wandered at its own sweet will and escaped as best it might through the chinks in the 'dry-stane' walls or crevices in the roof...the dear old woman by the fire... 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 'Gaidhlig gu leor'. But by and by 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...down from the presbytery on the rock to the little harbour, and by the door of the small store... lent 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 and 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. So I had to wait about half an hour before he would be persuaded to sing, although the men urged him with 'Suas leis an oran'. He continued mending his brown nets in the glorious morning sunlight, with the purple sea lying quiet around us. But at last he yielded, and having once begun, sang verse after verse, and I got it noted down. He

sang it with a peculiar woodwind-like quality of voice, which suggested a theme for orchestral treatment.<sup>10</sup>

It took a week before Marjory was able to leave the island. Morning after morning she was told that the sea was too rough for boats to go out. Finally the sea was calm enough for the boat to take her back to the mainland with a collection of tunes unknown in the outside world. The work of writing down and translating the Gaelic words she was prepared to leave to others.

For about a decade before 1905 Marjorie had been experimenting with producing arrangements of Gaelic songs modelled on the Art Songs which she had been singing and lecturing about. As a performer she was also aware of the need for musical accompaniments that enhanced the songs she was singing, often finding the published accompaniments to Scottish songs lacking in this respect.

These many years devoted to showing what the great songwriters could do in their settings of a simple vocal line of melody were surely my best apprenticeship for the task of trying to blend traditional melody with appropriate harmonic setting.

The Ducoudray Breton volume, with its strangely beautiful airs on unfamiliar scales, its poetically and musically suggestive pianoforte accompaniments, and its French singing translations, had long before opened to my mind a vista of the possibilities there were of a new development in the direction of a national Scoto-Celtic song – an art song that should incorporate faithfully within itself our Scoto-Celtic melodic heritage, while at the same time growing organically out of the miniature forms which it this enlarged and enframed.<sup>11</sup>

In February 1907 Marjorie Kennedy-Fraser gave her first recital of Hebridean songs, using her own arrangements. This was successful enough to encourage her to continue with the work of collecting. Her daughter, Patuffa, was engaged in musical studies in London by that time, and as Marjory wanted her daughter's company on her next trip, she had to wait until July, when Patuffa was on holiday, before setting out for Eriskay once more.

Times were changing. This time the Kennedy-Frasers were able to take recording equipment with them. The machine they used was called a graphophone. Some idea of the problems they would have encountered moving this machine around are shown in an American film made in 2000 called *Songcatcher*. Although set in the Appalachian Mountains the theme of *Songcatcher* is reminiscent of Marjorie Kennedy-Fraser's work in the Hebrides. It would seem that in the Appalachian Mountains, which remained very isolated until the twentieth century, all sorts of songs which had been brought there from various parts of the British Isles several centuries previously, had been preserved in very pure form, and, at the same time as Marjorie Kennedy-Fraser

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<sup>10</sup> Kennedy-Fraser, *A Life of Song*, pp. 101-2.

<sup>11</sup> Kennedy-Fraser, *A Life of Song*, p.106.

was recording the music of the Hebrides, there were researchers doing the same thing in that part of Tennessee and North Carolina. There is some interesting footage in the film of the researcher and her assistant trying to move primitive recording equipment through very difficult terrain, and showing the amazement of people who were totally unfamiliar with modern technology at hearing recordings of their own voices.<sup>12</sup>

As well as spending time on Eriskay the Kennedy-Frasers were able to spend time collecting songs on Barra before they returned to Edinburgh. Those of us who do not live in the Hebrides tend to lump all Gaelic music together, without being aware that there are differences in both styles of singing and repertoires between one island and the next. During their two-day stay in the northern part of the island they recorded an old woman singing a song called *The Fairy Plain*, which the old woman said she had learnt from a fairy woman. That would make it one of a considerable body of Gaelic songs believed to be of fairy origin.<sup>13</sup>

Acting on an impulse Marjory ignored a warning that Castle Bay, the chief port of Barra, was too sophisticated to be a suitable place to look for traditional music. She and Patuffa went there, contacting Michael Macneill, father of the priest on Eriskay, who arranged for them to hear some of the best singers on the island before their boat left at noon the following day.

Michael MacNeill might have been specially commissioned for the job, he was so efficient. He had sent around the fiery cross, so to speak, the singers were all gathered in his store on the quay...and he himself acted as master of ceremonies. He took from his pocket a note book in which he had entered a list of the most noteworthy of the ancient traditional songs of Barra and its dependent islets, and he called on each singer in turn, making choice himself of what they should sing. They were all old women — women who had never left the Isles, spoke no English, and were still as true to the old traditions as they might have been two or three hundred years earlier. Our graphophone had been placed on the smooth even surface of the store counter where Patuffa officiated. A great crowd stood inside, others craned their necks from outside, all eager to listen and adjudicate at this festival. Ducoudray himself could not have fared better with his government commission in Brittany than I did that morning under the command of Michael Macneill.

The most valuable find that morning was undoubtedly *Kishmul's Galley*. The singer was a woman from the smaller rock island of Mingulay. I had intended visiting this island... but the weather was too stormy that summer, and we were told that if we attempted it we would have to be thrown ashore like mail bags!

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<sup>12</sup> My thanks to Duane Gordon, webmaster of *Dollymania*, a Dolly Parton Fan Club, for this information.

<sup>13</sup> For a fuller treatment of the subject of fairy music see F Collinson; *The Traditional and National Music of Scotland*, Routledge, (London, Keegan and Paul, 1966).

I was disappointed that we could not land at Mingulay. But had we done so, we might have missed the best singer of that isle, as she was presently beside us on the mainland of Barra... and she it was that morning who was called on by Michael Macneill to sing to us '*Latha Dhomh am Beinn a Cheathaich*', the song I have called '*Kishmul's Galley*'

In order to get records of as many airs as possible, we generally made a practice of taking only one verse and chorus on the cylinder, but fortunately in this case (and in the case of *Hebrid seas*) we took a number of verses, and in doing so got some valuable variants. In my published version of *Kishmul* I give three forms of the melody, all noted accurately from that record, and forming in themselves a most valuable example of the consummate artistic treatment by the singer of a great theme.<sup>14</sup>

From Barra they went to Uig, on the Isle of Skye.

At Uig we were the guests of one of Patuffa's friends, whose husband had rented Conan Lodge for the shooting. But here I found that song-research was barely possible in such conditions. Our hostess was keen enough, but our successful host thought me quite mad when I sneaked off at the civilized dinner-hour of eight to trudge some miles in the rain to a fisher's hut (I could find him at home only at this hour), where I heard and noted *Clanranald's Parting Song*.<sup>15</sup>

From Skye they went back to the mainland to stay with a friend of Marjory's, Jane Hay, at St. Abb's Haven. While there she learnt from a herring curer in a nearby fishing village that some island girls were working there on the mainland in the herring curing industry.

When I asked if the island girls had any songs, he answered 'No'; then as an afterthought added 'Oh yes, they have some nonsense of their own.' After quite an hour, I got him to lead me at last to the lodging of the island girls. They good naturedly sang me one or two good and to me unfamiliar airs, including 'Hebrid Seas' (or 'Heman Dubh'). I wanted that tune. What was my chagrin to find that I had neither pencil nor paper! I might have bought these in the village? I had not a penny in my pocket: I was out with an afternoon picnic party; where was my party? They had driven back to St. Abb's apparently hours ago... There was nothing for it but to thank the girls, tell them I hoped to see them again, and hungrily face the walk home in the gathering darkness, miles over the cliffs. And the girls were leaving for the Outer Isles (the Lewes) the day after tomorrow. I was not to be beaten. Next morning I wired my son in Edinburgh to join me at Eyemouth with the graphophone. On the very day they were to leave for the Isles, I called again on

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<sup>14</sup> Kennedy-Fraser, *A Life of Song*, pp. 118-9.

<sup>15</sup> Kennedy-Fraser, *A Life of Song*, p.120.

the girls. They were all in a state of the greatest excitement, packing their kists for the homeward voyage. No, they had no time now to sing songs. I suggested that they might listen perhaps while they packed.. So David set up the graphophone on the table in the centre of the room and we let them hear one of their own island songs, song by one of their own folk. In a moment all was changed. They forgot their packing, they crowded round the graphophone, they laughed till the tears came, they were each ready and eager to sing, and it needed no pressure now to get a record of *Heman Dubh*. I have given this in volume 1 as *Hebrid Seas*, and fortunately we took several verses of it.

We got other songs from them, but this '*Hebrid Seas*' was the outstanding find that day.<sup>16</sup>

In 1908 Marjory was back on Barra once more.

It was shortly after this that Marjory met the man who was to be her chief collaborator in the work of making the songs of the Hebrides available to the outside world. The Rev. Kenneth Macleod, a native Gaelic speaker born and raised on Eigg, was minister of Straloch at the time, and his role was to provide translations of the songs, and then, with Marjory's help, provide singable versions in English. It is under Kenneth's name that the prose tales attached to some of the songs in *Songs of the Hebrides* appear. Marjory's brother, Dr. Charles Kennedy, observed that if the rest of the work, referring to the newly published volume 1, should become obsolete, these prose tales would survive. Marjory herself commented that the story that goes with *The Christ Child's Lullaby* never went stale, although she told it all over Europe and North America. For my part, having heard Jeannie Kelso read the story of Una the Lonely, before singing *Kishmul's Galley* on several occasions I can understand why this should be so.

The first volume of *Songs of the Hebrides* was published in 1909. In order to bring the work of publishing 'Songs of the Hebrides' to fruition, Marjory eventually had to give up some of her other work. This did not happen, however, until, as she put it 'the war relieved me of it automatically.'<sup>17</sup>

It was here that Marjory's established international reputation as a performer stood her in good stead. When volume one was published she was able to give two recitals in London to introduce it to a wider audience. Marjory Kennedy-Fraser was not the first person to publish a collection of Hebridean tunes and the words associated with them. Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*, published in the middle of the nineteenth century only contains the words of the songs, not the music, but in 1911 a book containing both words and single line melodies of Gaelic songs arranged by Frances Tolmie was published<sup>18</sup>. Frances Tolmie, however, was not a performer with an international

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<sup>16</sup> Kennedy-Fraser, *A Life of Song*, pp.121-2.

<sup>17</sup> Kennedy-Fraser, *A Life of Song*, p.133.

<sup>18</sup> *One Hundred and Five Songs of Occupation from the Western Isles of Scotland*, (reprinted by Llanerch Press in 1997).

reputation. Her single-line arrangements of the melodies would certainly be much more consistent with the way she had heard them sung, but her collection has remained the preserve of a small number of people with a strong interest in Gaelic song. Marjory Kennedy-Fraser, on the other hand, adapted and performed the songs to suit the tastes of concert-goers throughout the civilized world. On the one hand she introduced these songs to a huge international audience that would otherwise have remained completely unaware of them, on the other hand, her arrangements have been severely criticized by some devotees of Gaelic song for their lack of fidelity to the way in which she would have heard them sung by the islanders themselves.

Yet for most of the twentieth century most people's acquaintance with Gaelic song is likely to have been through Marjory Kennedy-Fraser's work. These were the arrangements and translations favoured by singers such as Kenneth Mackellar and Sydney Mac Ewan. These singers were internationally known and their recordings had a world-wide market that included the Australian country town I which I grew up. At that time a few of the songs published by Marjory Kennedy-Fraser in her *Songs of the Hebrides* volumes were included in a weekly singing broadcast to schools by the ABC, which was heard throughout Australia. I, along with possibly hundreds of thousands of children who were in primary school in Australia at that time, acquired some familiarity with songs such as *The Peat Fire Flame* and *Ho ro, My Nut Brown Maiden*.<sup>19</sup>

Clement Hosking would probably not have been able to achieve so much in the area of Gaelic song in Sydney between the 1930's and the 1960's if he had not come across *Songs of the Hebrides* at the beginning of the Depression. The founder of Sydney's Gaelic choir, *Coisir Gaidhlig Astrailia*, Robin Mackenzie-Hunter, has made the point that these days, with the decline of traditional culture and isolation in the Hebrides, even young islanders are more likely to become acquainted with their musical heritage through the works of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser than by any other means.

This, then, is Marjory Kennedy-Fraser's achievement. Not that she rescued the songs in *Songs of the Hebrides* from oblivion — they have all been independently recorded by the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh — but that she made them available to the outside world in a way that no previous collector had ever been able to do to those of us who grew up far away from Scotland. This is why Marjory Kennedy-Fraser's work is so important. However

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<sup>19</sup> When I was at high school I was able to get hold of the Gaelic words to the *Eriskay Love Lilt*, because one day a girl in my class brought to school a copy of the words and music of that song, which she was learning for a singing competition. The arrangement she was using was, of course, the Kennedy-Fraser-Macleod one, complete with the Gaelic words, which I copied. I already knew the English version, because I had already acquired a 45 rpm record—Kenneth Mackellar recording with the *Eriskay Love Lilt* on it, over the counter from a shop in Kempsey. I think I may safely say that without Marjory-Kennedy Fraser's work my knowledge of Gaelic song would have been non-existent until I was in my forties. It would not have been something with which I grew up.

much her arrangements of the songs are open to criticism, that cannot be taken away from her.<sup>20</sup>

After the publication of the first volume of *Songs of the Hebrides* and the recitals in London that followed Marjory was suffering from the effects of overstrain and could not carry out her work of collecting and arranging Gaelic song on top of her professional work in Edinburgh. In 1911 the Government of the United Kingdom recognized the value of her research work and awarded her a civil list pension. 1911 was also the year of Marjory's next trip to the Hebrides, to Barra, accompanied by a sister-in-law, Mrs. Matthay, as well as Patuffa.

The chief event of our short stay on the Isle was a waulking, got up for our benefit by Annie Johnston's mother. The woollen web to be shrunk was some blanketing she herself had spun. We were leaving for Benbecula the next day, so the waulking had to take place in the middle of the week.

The waulking songs are probably the oldest among the surviving songs of the Isles. Unlike spinning, which may be performed either alone or in company, waulking calls for the collaboration of from ten to twenty women. The songs used are evolved from the rhythm of this communal labour, unfamiliar now on the mainland and fast passing away even from the isles. This shrinking of the home-spun, home-woven web was done by the process of soaking it in dilute ammonia<sup>21</sup>, then thumping it long and vigorously on an improvised table until it dried. Communal labour tends to conserve the chants used in its practice, and in waulking the heavy, long sustained, steadily rhythmical work could only be performed with the help of such strongly rhythmical song. And if waulking is the most important of the communal labour-song functions, it is also the gayest. Its gaiety is infectious, as anyone who has had the good fortune to assist at a waulking can testify. Little wonder the old wives tell that when they were girls it was held a greater privilege to be invited to a waulking than even to a dance. At a waulking the young men took no active part. They look on from a respectful distance by the open door or skylight window of the barn where the women, young and old, are seated at work. No doubt the lads make note the while of the particular maiden they hope to see home after the function, but the onlookers here are not essential. The real source of joy for the women lies in the strangely

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<sup>20</sup> If the versions of *Kishmul's Galley* found in *Songs of the Hebrides* vol.1 pp.80-3 are compared with the version recorded by the School of Scottish Studies in 1954 (No.4 in the *Scottish Tradition* series) you will find it difficult to believe that it is the same song. Serious criticism of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser's work would be on the grounds that it was not true to what she heard the islanders singing and this is not clear. Musical merit is quite another matter, as most people would find her arrangements of Hebridean songs beautiful in their own right. Great singers have certainly been prepared to use them.

<sup>21</sup> Marjory is being very coy here, the cloth is soaked in a barrel of urine, to which all the neighbours contribute.

exhilarating effect of the socially performed, long continued repetitions of any bodily movements accompanied by song.

At this waulking we were women only: the men were out with the boats, and the women were already tired with a hard day's herring packing. Yet the stirring old waulking song dispelled weariness and stimulated even the aged leaders to long-sustained exertion. At waulkings and social functions of any kind it is the custom to leave the door open to welcome anyone who cares to enter. While we were in the thick of the excitement in Mrs. Johnston's barn – all the lookers-on joining in the exhilarating refrains – a woman entered, dressed entirely in black, with black draperies over her head. She came slowly in, and after a while glided as slowly out. It had a strange effect, this 'skeleton at the feast', but no-one disturbed her.

A long narrow table had been improvised in the candle-lit barn. The women were seated on benches on either side. At one end stood a wooden tub in which the blanket was soaking. From the tub it was lifted and gathered in the hand like a thick woolen scarf, then stretched down the table to the far end, where, turned back on itself, it lay on the boards like an elongated letter 'C'.

The seated women, grasping in both hands the portion of the thick scarf which lay before them, lifted it and began slowly to beat it rhythmically on the boards, the two sides alternating in movement.

An old woman, one of the two song-leaders, began to croon softly. And, as one listened, a quaint refrain shaped itself, a theme fashioned in strong rhythmic and melodic outlines, calculated, like a fuge (sic) subject, to impress itself easily on the memory. This was caught up and repeated by the workers tutti. A verse-phrase of a recitative-like character, perhaps consisting of only eight notes to eight syllables, was then intoned by the leader; and this was followed by a second refrain, longer than the first, but again of a strongly rhythmical character. This, in its turn, was caught up and repeated in chorus. And now the leader sang the alternating verse portions only, leaving the refrains to the other women. But the musical interest was not yet exhausted, for the leader skillfully varied the verse themes, and I tried in vain to catch and note all the changes rung on a few notes by one of those capable, practiced folksingers of the Isles.

As the workers got heated with the excitement of tone and rhythm and carried away by the hypnotic effect of repetition, the work became more and more rapid, and the cloth passed gradually around the table sun-wise. The possibilities of one song having been exhausted, a second was intoned by a fresh leader, who in her turn set the pattern of the refrain or refrains (some songs have only

one recurrent refrain), and exercised her skill also in the improvisation of verse strains.<sup>22</sup>

Waulking in the traditional way survived in the Western Isles because those island communities were too poor, small and remote to be able to support fulling mills, which began to make their appearance on the mainland of Britain in the 1100's.<sup>23</sup> But even in the 1920s rising levels of prosperity meant that waulkings were being held for the sole purpose of preserving the songs, rather than because there was cloth that needed to be shrunk by hand at home. Marjory describes such an event a few pages later in her book. She commented (p.165) that life in the Western Isles had probably changed more in the last twenty years than in the previous three hundred.

Leaving Barra, the party went on to Benbecula, where Marjory was able to record the singing of Calum Barraich, a singer whose songs were of the kind translated by James Macpherson in the eighteenth century but apparently mixed with large amounts of material which Macpherson had composed himself and attributed to Osian, the son of the Irish hero Fionn Mac Cumhail.

The second decade of the twentieth century saw several trips to America, accompanied by Patuffa. On one of these trips she sang at Cornell University, where her son was an academic. 1917 saw the publication of the second volume of *Songs of the Hebrides*, as well as Marjory's contribution of a libretto for an opera by Bantock based on the story of the seal-wife. This opera was finally staged in 1924, with Marjory on stage playing the part of the early eighteenth century Skye poetess, Mary Macleod, in her old age.

Visits to the Isles resumed after the end of world War One. In Barra in 1920 and 1923 Marjory was able to collect enough material for a third volume of *Songs of the Hebrides*. She also describes another interesting experience she had on Barra at that time.

As I was walking back along the western shore from my second visit to the old singer at North Bay, I chanced on Ruth Waddell and her sister Maimie (violinist) as they rested on the sands in the warm afternoon sun. Glad of the rest, I lay down between them. We were some distance from the water's edge, parallel with which ran a long line of skerries, reefs that are covered at high tide. On the skerries lay basking in the sun a number of the great grey seals—seals that visit these isles only at intervals. My friends, great enthusiasts for the Hebridean songs — they use their own fine-string-instrument arrangements for the students — said to me: 'Sing them the *Seal-woman's Sea Joy*'. In the great stretch of the four miles of white sands running north and south there was no sign of human presence, no movement save that of the seagulls. I raised myself only on my elbow — happily I did not show myself erect — and sang to this strange far-away audience the first phrase of the song. Instantly there was a response from the seal rocks.

<sup>22</sup> Kennedy-Fraser, *A Life of Song*, pp.145-7.

<sup>23</sup> W.G Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape*, (Folio Society, 2005) p.84.

Like a fusillade, single note after single note came from each seal in succession from the southerly end of the reefs to the north.

Then, from out a few seconds of intense silence, came a beautiful solo voice, which sang to us a phrase we had never heard before. I had my pencil and paper in hand on which I had been noting the songs of '*Bean Somhairle Bhig*'. I noted the seal air at once, and showing it to the cellist and violinist asked 'Is that so?' and they answered 'That is so'. The voice of the seal was so beautiful (of a rich mezzo-soprano quality) and the cantabile so perfect, that I should almost have believe I had been dreaming but for the corroboration of my two musician fellow-hearers. What did it mean? Did they take me for another seal?

Punch made good fun of this when I related it to my London audience. The writer of the skit suggested that the British National Opera might retrieve its losses by capturing and exploiting that same seal prima donna.<sup>24</sup>

Marjory Kennedy-Fraser lived to see an interest in the music of the Hebrides take root all over Europe, the United States and the British Empire. Having been awarded a CBE by the British Government in 1924, she was awarded an honorary doctorate in Music by the University of Edinburgh in recognition of her work. Folk music was now academically respectable.

By the late 1920's the work of collecting and publishing the music of the Hebrides was as complete as such a project can be. Four volumes had been published altogether, the three volumes of *Songs of the Hebrides*, published by Boosey and company between 1909 and 1922, and a further volume entitled *From the Hebrides*, published by Patersons in 1926. The music was still accumulating, but no further volumes were published. In 1930, not long before she died, Marjory presented all her recordings and song archives to the University of Edinburgh.

Marjory remained a performer all her life. She wrote in *A Life of Song* that she would probably never give a farewell recital (p.169). This was written in 1928, just over two years before she died on the twenty-second of November, 1930.

*Songs of the Hebrides* was last reprinted in 2002 by Westport Books. This enables a new generation of singers to perform the Kennedy-Fraser/Macleod arrangements on stage. *A Life of Song* was reprinted by Anro Communications in California in 1987. At the National Mod — Scotland's premier Gaelic festival held annually in October each year— there is a section where competitors are judged on how faithfully they reproduce the arrangements in *Songs of the Hebrides*. According to Robin Mackenzie-Hunter this always attracts a lot of interest. Marjory Kennedy-Fraser's and Kenneth Macleod's legacy endures.

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<sup>24</sup> Kennedy-Fraser, *A Life of Song*, pp.163-4.