
On the work of Kenneth Macleod

Marjory Kennedy-Fraser

The following is Marjory Kennedy-Fraser's introduction to her collaborator Kenneth Macleod's *The Road to the Isles. Poetry, lore and tradition of the Hebrides*. (Edinburgh, 1927). As she explains, the book was published to make available his song and prose texts in a more convenient form than in the music books and (as Macleod mentions in his preface) to present material issued in *The Celtic Review* from 1907 to a world market. The essay throws valuable light on the perceived role of Macleod as an artistic maker of tradition-derived material rather than a tradition bearer or folklorist. In his own preface:

In the case of the lyrics, some of the translations are in prose; the form of the others has been determined by the tunes to which they are sung. Hebridean song is sometimes so strangely irregular that an interpreter who wishes to preserve its atmosphere is forced to devise forms of his own, regardless of convention. It is quite clear in the notes what of the material is old, what new, and what partly new and partly old... The writer has a difficulty of his own; that of knowing where the old material ends and the new begins... in a work of this kind one has to weave the threads that are blown by the wind towards one; a half-remembered tale, a tag of a song, a proverb, a passing remark at a feast or in a sorrow.

The fundamental, the long-enduring element of racial song, is undoubtedly melody. Melodic inspiration and invention are rare, very rare indeed. But melodies, once they are forged are durable and mostly outlast by generations, if not by centuries, the words to which they may have been originally sung. And yet a melody alone is not a song! However fine a melody may be, the poet born, if he have as much understanding of the emotional possibilities of a tune as he has of the lyrical and hypnotic potentialities of words, can make of a melody, welded with his own infectiously inspired words, a great song.

To keep alive the traditionally preserved hoard of racial song, the national poet must be re-born every couple of centuries at least, if not every three or four generations. And, like Robert Burns in Lowland Scotland in the eighteenth century, he must use all that comes to hand, all that has survived of the finest lyrical output of the previous generations. Single lines, refrains, beautiful thoughts, heart-stirring local imagery, rhythms, metres, etc., must all be garnered and re-fashioned into lyrics that will be new and yet old. This call for great artistry, but the songs thus fashioned, while original, will be still racial in character.

Of Burns' 'My Love is like a red, red, rose,' Edmund Gosse says somewhere that not a line of it is original - that it was all fashioned out of the wreck, the flotsam and jetsam of earlier Scots song. Yet, is not this the law of life, that 'there is nothing new under the sun,' although, luckily for us, there is always possible a new blend.

And what Robert Burns did in the eighteenth century Kenneth MacLeod is doing now for Scots song.

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Kenneth MacLeod in his childhood in Eigg heard much and he forgot little - in his teens he became a conscious collector. But the lore in this book must not be regarded as mere translation. Badly translated songs are worthless, alike as lyrics and as words for singing. The atmosphere, the emotional content of a lyric, depend as much on its sound-colour, its rhythm-clang as on its verbal meaning.

Describing in 'The Reiving Ship' the vessel's exultant, headlong, reckless, outward course, his lines run:

Grinds beneath her grey-blue limpets,
Crunches curving whelks to sand-drift,

and, clearing the rocks and getting into quieter waters:

Sweeps she gaily Moola's waters,
Kyles and Moyles to fair green Isla,
Leaps her way to Isles of daring,
Gleaming Isles of blades and laughter.

How suggestively descriptive of the vessel's grating on the rocks, in her hurried outward quest, are the harsh gr's and cr's of the first couplet, and how contrastingly the soft liquid l's of the second depict the suavity of the open sea.

Many are his contributions to mystical lore, one of the loveliest being 'The Vow Song of the Birds,' and, to the cult of Columba, 'The Iona Rainbow'; for communal singing there are the well-known tramping songs, and the, as yet, less known 'Joy Invocation' and 'Birlinn Health-drinking Chant.'

His restorations of the pre-Christian Heroic include: 'Aillte,' an Ossianic ballad; 'Deirdre's Farewell,' a still more ancient fragment; 'Cuchullin's Lament for his Son,' a story parallel to that of the Persian 'Sohrab and Rostrom' of Mathew Arnold's poem; and, finest of all, perhaps, 'Fionn's keening for his grandson Oscar.'

In the expression of Sea-joy he surely finds himself. The:

All I long for
Outsails my longing far,

Of 'Sea Moods,' culminates in:

Joy of Seeking
Joy of ne'er finding.

And in his Sailing Song Cycle, he voices the universal human longing to escape from the humdrum of our daily round:

All the wonders yont out croft dykes
I will see if I but may ;

All the ships that sails to Lochland
I will steer if I but may ;

All the sunsets yont the Coolins
I will reach if I but may,

and through 'The Kyle of Moole' we sail, until on the 'Leaping Galley' we find ourselves at last exultantly sailing seaward.

I have had the joy and privilege of singing and speaking Kenneth Macleod's lyrics and tales from John o' Groat's to Land's End, and further afield from Chicago to New York, from Amsterdam to Paris. And everywhere I have been asked if the English of his Tales and Songs might not be had in a less bulky form than that of our musical publications.

His lyrics were written for singing. A lyric that reads beautifully may not sing, and words written for singing may cry out for their tunes. But his prose tales lose nothing in this timeless edition.

The beautiful 'Christ Child's Lullaby' and 'The Death of Oscar' are notable examples. Of the quality of his prose, one writer has said that it is finer than many a one's verse, that it is indeed at times comparable to a rosary of moonstones.

The nature of his work of restoration may be summed up in a parable of his own. It alludes most quaintly to an eighteenth-century gathering up of the wreckage of a very ancient St Donnan Song - attributed in legend to the angels - a song which he himself re-fashioned over a century later.

'The Isle of Eigg, as the sheep know but too well, has its own share of bramble bushes. A hundred years ago, a woman who had a name for thrift as well as for art, went wool-gathering in those same bramble bushes as regularly as others went dulse-pulling on the shore. And in due time there came out of her loom a web of blues and greens and *Crotals*, which a king might envy. Generally the web went to a neighbour of her own, Iain Og Morrigh, who had an eye for art, if not for thrift, and who, like herself, was a weaver, but of song-threads blown about by the four winds of heaven. It was he who, standing one day by the tomb of St Donnan, and looking across to the face of Corravine, weaved old threads into new so cunningly that none could tell what of it the web was his own and what the angels'. If, after a hundred years, the loosening threads have been put once more through the loom, it is still the same web that comes out of it "Youth on age, on the face of Corravine."

Marjory Kennedy-Fraser
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