

# SONGS OF OUR HIGHLAND FOREFATHERS

ADA MACLEOD

THERE is something significant in the fact that the earliest band of Scottish emigrants to Nova Scotia—those kilted Highlanders who, in their haste to touch the shore of this new land of promise, leaped from the deck of the *Hector* into the surf—were headed by a schoolmaster and a piper. Rich was the heritage brought to our Maritime Provinces by the Gael. There was what Matthew Arnold terms “the Celtic reverence and enthusiasm for genius, learning, and the things of the mind”; and there was also a certain spiritual element which was to add leaven to the mass—mysticism, breadth of sympathy, a quickening imagination, a soul responsive to all generous impulses:

We are the makers of music,  
We are the dreamers of dreams.

It may be well for us to listen across the vanished years for an echo of the dreams and the music that the piper brought—some lilt of the songs that our Highland forefathers had sung around northern firesides where the peat-fire glowed. For the Highland hearthstone was ever the place of *ceilidh*. This word crossed the Atlantic, and to this day a “kailey” means a neighbourly, chatty visit. But the true *ceilidh* was no mere assembly for gossip. Its true purpose was the telling and hearing of the ancient *sgeulachdan* or tales, and a whole volume of folk-lore could be compiled in a single night at one of these firesides. They were no ordinary stories, many of them, rather the genuine Ossianic poems which had not been committed to writing, but handed down from time immemorial from one generation to another by word of mouth, with very slight changes in wording. In this case memory was assisted by the music, for all the Celtic bards were musicians, and usually composed the airs to which their verses were adapted. The Ossianic poems are still sung to the original airs. Many of them may be found in a collection of Highland music published by Captain Simon Fraser of Inverness.

Deep from the heart of the Gael sprang these early poems, supreme in their embodiment of its pathos and passion, its loyalty

to friend, its vindictiveness to foe, its undying courage; and there have ever been in the race men of like qualities who loved the poems enough to pass them on. Never to the mind of the Greeks did any of the Homeric heroes seem more real than the characters in these poems to the imagination of the Celt, standing out in sharp relief against the dim background of that age when Christianity was gaining its first struggling foothold in Erin and Alba. Greatest of all was Fionn or Fingal, who holds in the legends of the North the same place that King Arthur holds in Cymric literature, marshalling his primitive hosts against invading hordes of Scandinavians. There is the great bard himself, Ossian, son of Fionn, who, after his warrior days are ended, and of his kindred none survive, sits in his empty hall, blind and alone, listening to the dirge of the sea and the wind wailing about the cairns of dead heroes. But he remembers that over the shoulder of the mountain the mists are creeping; he believes that in their wraith-like forms the spirits of his fathers and his lost comrades come back to visit him, and with them he holds converse. There is "the great Cuchullin with his war-chariot, the brown-haired and beautiful Diarmid, slayer of the boar by which he himself was slain, the strong and valiant Gaul, son of Movni, the rash Conan, the swift and gallant Cailta." And then he remembers that one true heart is yet left to him, the young Malvina, the betrothed of his slain son, Oscar; he calls to her, and she sings to him; and as the rays of the setting sun fall on the sightless eyes of the old man, he too lifts his voice in those songs which ever since have re-echoed around Celtic hearths.

Here is part of Ossian's "Address to the Setting Sun"—not from MacPherson, but taken down in the original Gaelic by Hugh McCallum from a man in the Outer Hebrides who could neither read nor write. His translation is literal:—

Hast thou left the blue course of the sky  
 Faultless son of golden locks?  
 The gates of the night are for thee,  
 And thy place of repose is in the West.  
 The waves gather slowly around,  
 To see him of fairest countenance;  
 Raising their heads in fear.  
 As they witness thy beauty in repose,  
 They flee pale from thy side.  
 Take thou rest in thy cave,  
 O sun, and return with rejoicing.  
 As the sunbeam in the winter time  
 Descending quick on the slope of Lena,  
 So are the days of the Fingalians.  
 As the sun becoming darkened among showers,

The dark clouds of the sky descended  
 And bore away the joyous light from the huntsman.  
 The bare branches of the wood weep,  
 And the soft herbage of the mountain withers.  
 But the sun shall return again  
 To the beautiful forest of the fresh-clothed branch,  
 And each bough shall smile in the early summer,  
 Looking up to the son of the sky.

The following is the description of Cuchullin's chariot (MacPherson):

The car, the car of battle comes, like the flame of death; the rapid car of Cuchullin, the noble son of Semo. It bends behind like a wave near a rock; like the golden mist of the heath. Its sides are embossed with stones and sparkle like the sea round the boat of night. Of polished yew is its beam, and its seat of the smoothest bone. The sides are replenished with spears; and the bottom is the footstool of heroes. Before the right side of the car is seen the snorting horse, the high-maned, broad-chested, proud, high-leaping, strong steed of the hill. Loud and resounding is his hoof, the spreading of his mane above is like that stream of smoke on the heath. Bright are the sides of the steed, and, his name is Sulin—sifadda. Before the left side of the car is seen the snorting horse; the thin-maned, high-headed, strong-hoofed fleet-bounding son of the hill; his name is Dusronnal among the stormy sons of the sword. A thousand thongs bind the car on high. Hard polished bits shine in a wreath of foam. Thin thongs, bright-studded with gems, bind on the stately necks of the steeds—the steeds that, like wreaths of mist, fly over the streamy vales. The wildness of deer is in their course, the strength of the eagle descending on her prey. Their noise is like the blast of winter on the sides of the snow-headed Gormal.

These are from the classics of the Gaelic language, "a breath of the air from the morning of the world", and in many cases the recital of them was left to the *Seannichie* or professional storyteller. Within the circle of the *ceilidh*, however, each one was expected to take his turn:

*A chiad sgial air fear an taighe,  
 Sgial gu la air an aoidh.*

The first story from the host,  
 Story till day from the guest.

And if it be true that the life and character of a people can be judged by its music and song—then surely the nature of the lyrics and melodies that echoed around these humble hearths must prove that the race which composed and loved such folk-music should rank among the best in the possession of exalted feelings, and refined tastes and sensibilities. Principal Shairp in one of his Oxford

lectures has said of it, "To Lowlanders, accustomed to read the great standard poets, and to measure all poetry by their model, it may be some advantage to turn aside and look at a poetry wholly unlike that of England, Rome or Greece, a poetry which is as spontaneous as the singing of birds and the beating of men's hearts; a poetry which is, in great measure, independent of books and manuscripts; a poetry which, if narrower in compass and less careful in finish, is as intense in feeling, and as true to nature and to man, as anything which the classical literatures contain."

Of the music it may be noted that most of what is known as "Scottish music" has been derived from these Gaelic airs. Under their inspiration Burns and other Lowland poets composed many of their noblest songs. Of one of these Burns says; "This is one of those fine Gaelic tunes preserved from time immemorial in the Hebrides; they seem to be the groundwork of many of our finest Scots pastoral tunes." A modern writer, Hamish McCunn, has said recently: "This Highland music possesses a wonderful and wild beauty of its own. Its pensive and somewhat melancholy imaginativeness, the grandeur and fierce energy of its sterner moods, and the immense variety and diversity of its character and scope, entitle it at once to permanent preservation and to the respect and admiration of all thoughtful and patriotic Scotsmen." Airs of a similar nature, however, may be found among all Celtic races. The beautiful melodies of Ireland, Wales and the Isle of Man are of the same type, while the national airs sung by the Breton peasants might easily be mistaken for Scottish melodies.

It is said that Gaelic is the finest language in the world to use in lovemaking, because of the variety and expressiveness of its terms of endearment. Therefore it is only natural that many of the songs of our Celtic ancestors should be love-songs. One of the sweetest was *Mairi Bhan Og* (Fair Young Mary) by Duncan Ban MacIntyre, "Duncan of the Songs", whose monument stands on a hillside by far Loch Awe. He was one of the most tuneful of Highland singers, though wholly unlettered, and he carried in his memory six thousand lines of his own composition, as well as a large amount of Ossianic poetry, to the very close of a long life, when it was written down by a young minister.

A lovely, lilting air is *Ho-ro mo nighean donn bhoidheach*, translated by Professor Blackie:—

Ho-ro my nut-brown maiden, Hi-ri my nut-brown maiden,  
Ho-ro-ro, maiden, for she's the maid for me.  
Her eye so mildly beaming, her look so frank and free,  
In waking and in dreaming, is evermore with me.

Another of Blackie's translations from the ancient Gaelic is *Gruagach Donn*:—

Brown-haired maid with witching smile,  
Full of love and free from guile,  
Softly 'neath the hawthorn tree  
Came thy whispered troth to me.

The vein of pathos that runs through all Celtic song and music is strongly marked in the love-song *Air Feasgar Ciuin Ceitein*, in the English version of Christopher North:—

The stars are burning cheerily, cheerily,  
Ho-ro Mairi dhu, turn ye to me!  
The sea-mew is moaning drearily, drearily,  
Ho-ro Mairi dhu, turn ye to me!  
Cold is the storm-wind that ruffles his breast  
But warm are the downy plumes lining his nest.  
Cold blows the storm there, soft falls the snow,  
Then ho-ro, Mairi dhu, turn ye to me.

The waves are dancing cheerily, cheerily,  
Ho-ro Mairi dhu, turn ye to me  
The sea-birds are wailing wearily, wearily,  
Ho-ro Mairi dhu, turn ye to me.  
Hushed be thy moaning, lone bird of the sea,  
Thy home on the rocks is a shelter to thee.  
Thy house the angry wave, mine but the lonely grave,  
Ho-ro, Mairi dhu, turn ye to me.

Then there was the *Cronan* or Lullaby, such as *O ho ro, i ri ri, caid-il gu lo*, in the well-known rendering by Sir Walter Scott beginning

O hush thee my baby, thy sire was a knight,  
Thy mother a lady both lovely and bright!

Or the old, old slumber song of the days of the reivers:—

Hush ye my bairnie, my bonnie wee laddie,  
When ye're a man ye shall follow yer daddie,  
Lift me a coo, and a goat, and a wether,  
Bringing them hame tae yer minnie thegither.

If the mood was for warlike songs, then there were the verses of John Roy Stuart. "His martial strains thunder along with the impetuosity of the mountain torrent—racy, sinewy and full of nerve." He was "out" in the Forty-five, and this is his Gaelic malediction on Cumberland:—

May William, the son of George, be as a leafless, splintered tree, rootless, branchless, sproutless. May there be no joy on his hearth, no wife, no brother, no son, no sounding harp or blazing wax.

After Culloden he had many hairbreadth escapes, and on one of these occasions he wrote what is called John Roy's Psalm, beginning thus:—

The Lord's my targe, I will be stout,  
With dirk and trusty blade;  
Though Campbells swarm in flocks about,  
I will not be afraid.

But the plaintive elegy or lament has always had strong appeal to the Highland heart. This belongs to the class of music specially suited to the Highland bagpipe, known in Gaelic as *An Ceol mor* and in English as pibroch. *MacIntosh's Lament* and *MacCrimmon's Lament* are well-known examples. Mendelssohn on a visit to the Highlands was much impressed with these stately dirges, and introduced the strains of the pibroch into one of his finest compositions. A familiar elegy is that written in the 17th century and called *Cumha Mac'ille-chalum Rarsaidh*, composed by his sister when *Iain Garbh* (John the Athlete) of the MacLeods of Raasay met an untimely death by drowning. "I will not raise a song since the Friday of my grief." It may be mentioned that Neil Munro recently composed a lament for another son of the same house—Alan Og MacLeod of Raasay, slain at Loos in the Great War:—

Beside him, when he fell there in his beauty,  
MacLeods of all the Islands should have died;  
Brave hearts his English! but they could not fathom  
To what old deeps the voice of Alan cried,  
When in that strange French countryside, war-battered,  
Far from the creeks of home and hills of heath,  
A boy, he kept the old tryst of his people  
With the dark girl Death.

Many writers have described the poignancy of the "lament" when our forefathers on the emigrant ships keened their farewell to Scotland. A lyric much used on such occasions is the "Farewell to Fiunary" by Dr. Norman MacLeod (*Caraid nan Gaidheal*, friend of the Gael). His writings are looked upon as standards in Gaelic style. Of his "Emigrant Ships" Professor Blackie says: "For graceful simplicity and profound pathos it is second to nothing that I know in any language, unless indeed it be the account of the death of Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo*, and some well-known chapters in the *Gospel of John*." Dr. Norman's wife composed the stirring

Sound the pibroch loud and high  
From John o'Groats to Isle o' Skye;

When the metrical version of the Psalms was first made in Gaelic, no suitable Highland airs were available, so it was found necessary to borrow Psalm tunes from the Scottish Psalter. Six tunes only were thus adopted—*French, Dundee, Elgin, York, Martyrs, and Old London*—but a peculiar method of singing them developed in the Highlands. The principal notes of the original airs were retained, but these were attended with such a number of variations as scarcely to be recognizable. To anyone who has heard these quavering minor airs sung by a Highland congregation, there is a strange resemblance to the sounds of nature all around—the wailing of the wind in the corries, the restless sighing of the sea, and a burden of “old unhappy far-off things” that brings unbidden tears to the eye. Yet there could be few things more impressive than the singing of *Dundee* by a thousand voices when people were gathered together for an open-air communion service—not only in the straths and glens of the Old Land, but on the hill-sides of Cape Breton and Prince Edward Island. At the head of a long table covered with white linen stood the aged pastor, bare-headed, dealing out to assistant elders the bread and wine, sacredest of earth’s symbols; while on either side, amid a solemn silence, a line of men and women, old and young, strong and feeble, sat with bowed heads while the “emblems” are passed slowly from hand to hand. Beautiful was the scene in its reverence and its meaning—beautiful too in its historic setting of the days when men had to seek in the lonely moors for a spot of God’s earth wherein to express in their own way their worship of the Highest.

Some of the poems mentioned in this article were taken down by Alexander Carmichael of Edinburgh from Donald MacLean who had emigrated to Canada. Many years after, he returned, as he said, “*Feuch am faighinn larach mo dha bhonn a bhothan, agus leathad mo dha shlinnein a dh ’uaigh ann am fearrann mo dhuthchais agus ann an uir m’athriche*”—“to see if I could get the site of my two soles of a bothy and the breadth of my two shoulders of a grave in the land of my heredity and in the lair of my fathers.” Not being successful in this, he returned to the land of his adoption.

MacLean had heard these poems in Canada from a woman called “*Sorcha Chlannradhail*”, Clara Clanranald, beside whom he lived for sixteen years. She had come to Cape Breton when her people were evicted from Ormacleit, South Uist, and she spoke so much of Uist and the Clanranalds that she came to be known by the name of her loved chief. When Donald MacLean left Canada she was 102 years of age, but was still active and industrious, in the possession of all her faculties, and of all her love for the “Old

Land." When MacLean went to bid her goodbye, she took his hand in her two hands, looked in his face with her large lustrous blue eyes full of tears, and this was the word she said:—

Thou art going away, beloved Donald, and may the great God be between thy two shoulders. Thou thyself wert the good neighbour and the kind friend. If it be that thou reach the land of thy heredity and the country of thy birth, and that thou should'st have to come back again to the land of thine adoption, I place it upon thee as a vow and as a charge, and as the nine fulfilments of the fairy women, that thou go to the burial-place of Michael at Ormacleit in Uist, and bring to me from there a little earth that shall be placed upon the tablet of my heart the day that I die.

And may Michael, kind-white, strong-white, red-white  
Preserve thee, protect thee, provide for thee,  
With the might of his hand, with the point of his spear,  
Under the shade of his shimmering shield.