



PROJECT MUSE®

*1951 Edinburgh People's Festival Ceilidh , and: Gaelic
Songs of Scotland: Women at Work in the Western Isles*
(review)

Heather Sparling

Journal of American Folklore, Volume 122, Number 483, Winter 2009,
pp. 83-85 (Review)

Published by American Folklore Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jaf.0.0066>



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/256972>

Sound Reviews

1951 Edinburgh People's Festival Ceilidh, 2005. Produced by Anna Lomax Wood and Jeffrey A. Greenberg. Edited and annotated by Ewan McVicar. Gaelic song transcriptions, translations, and notes by Morag NicLeod. Piping notes by Dougie Pincock. Rounder Records, CD (1), 11661-1786-2.

Gaelic Songs of Scotland: Women at Work in the Western Isles, 2006. Produced by Anna Lomax Wood and Jeffrey A. Greenberg. Selections, notes, and texts by Margaret Bennett. Rounder Records, CD (1), 11661-1785-2.

HEATHER SPARLING
Cape Breton University

These two CDs, valuable and recent releases from the ambitious Alan Lomax Collection, are both based on 1951 field recordings of Scottish songs and address quite different traditions. *Gaelic Songs of Scotland: Women at Work in the Western Isles* presents women's labor songs for activities such as spinning and milking, songs that are not readily available on other commercial recordings. The disc also includes songs that women sang while *waulking*, the beating of woven wool cloth on a table in order to shrink the fibers and weave, making the fabric warmer and more weatherproof. While waulking songs are available on several other recordings, the unique repertoire and performance styles represented on this CD make them distinctive. The seventeen women recorded are from the Outer Hebridean islands of South Uist, Benbecula, Barra, and Lewis, as well as the mainland area of Moidart. Interspersed between the twenty-six songs are fascinating excerpts from Lomax's interviews with the singers, who describe their work.

1951 Edinburgh People's Festival Ceilidh is a recording of a concert that many believe was pivotal in the Scottish folk revival. The recording gives the impression of being an unmediated reproduction of the event, because it in-

cludes Hamish Henderson's remarks as master of ceremonies and the singers' casual comments regarding lighting and time. However, the liner notes advise that the recording has been edited. A total of twenty-seven musical numbers were performed by piper John Burgess (from Easter Ross), Gaelic singers Calum Johnston and Flora MacNeil (both of Barra), and Scots singers Jimmy MacBeath (Portsoy), Jessie Murray (Buckie), Blanche Wood (Portknockie), and John Strachan (near Fyvie). Hamish Henderson (Perthshire) sings one of his own compositions at the end, and all of the performers, together with the audience, sing "Scots, Wha Hae" to conclude.

The first People's Festival Ceilidh sought to represent a cross-section of Scotland's traditional musics, but its focus was on Northeast Scots song, Gaelic song, and piping. Music from the Shetlands and the Orkney Islands in the north and the Borders in the south is notably absent, and song is emphasized at the expense of instrumental music. Only the pipes have a role here, and it is a small one. However, this may be explained by the fact that instrumental music really only gathered momentum in the Scottish folk revival in the 1960s and 1970s. The Gaelic songs on this CD complement those on *Gaelic Songs of Scotland*, introducing a few Gaelic art songs as well as providing two additional labor songs (a waulking and a weaving song). However, labor songs dominate both CDs, perhaps giving a skewed impression of the varieties of songs to be found in Gaelic culture. Moreover, only one male Gaelic singer is featured; to this day, men are vastly underrepresented on commercial Gaelic song recordings. But some of these imbalances may be addressed in the four additional CDs drawn from Lomax's Gaelic recordings that Margaret Bennett tells me she is currently planning. Apparently, Alan Lomax was able to collect more than 250 songs in a matter of days, so there is much material yet to be released.

The first People's Festival Ceilidh arose in response to the official Edinburgh Festival, which began in 1947 and emphasized art music and culture. The Edinburgh Labour Festival Committee (consisting of members from the Trade Unions' Council, Miner's Union, Labour Party, and Community Party, as well as from cultural groups and independent arts organizations) felt that the Edinburgh Festival did an injustice to Scotland's unique folk arts. Therefore, the People's Festival aimed "to initiate action designed to bring the Edinburgh Festival closer to the people, to serve the cause of international understanding and goodwill" (p. 2), as is explained in McVicar's liner notes. Hamish Henderson, a major revival figure, organized the 1951 Ceilidh, introducing traditional singers and singing not heard in the city before. Many of these singers went on to play prominent roles in the Scottish folk revival. However, despite the success and influence of the first People's Festival Ceilidh, only three more were staged. In 1952, it was accused of being a "Communist Front," a fatal allegation during the build-up of the cold war. Attendance declined in 1953, and the 1954 People's Ceilidh was the last.

The extensive liner notes for both CDs provide transcriptions of all song lyrics and spoken text, as well as translations for all Gaelic songs and definitions of lesser-known Scots words. And yet, there are substantial differences between the two sets of notes. Those of *Gaelic Songs of Scotland* were written by Dr. Margaret Bennett of the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, a folklorist, singer, and Gaelic speaker. She provides a good introduction to the traditional context out of which the songs and singers came, describing crofting (farming on small rented lands), *shielings* (summer grazing spots), traditional architecture, and *ceilidhs* (visits). Bennett does not provide introductory comments to all songs, although she does explain the work involved in the various types of labor. She provides additional information for some songs, such as the composer, singing style, or details about the work. The liner notes are suitable for an audience unfamiliar with Gaelic songs and culture, and the suggested reading list provided at the end will be helpful to those who wish to investigate Gaelic song further. I was surprised, however, that no mention is

made of the continued presence of some of the songs and labor activities, including the waulking tradition, in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. (In Cape Breton, waulking is known as "milling".) Listeners might also like to know who the women were and how Lomax came to interview and record them. What did he ask them to sing, and how did he know what to ask for? I am also curious to learn how Bennett made her selections for this CD.

The liner notes for *1951 Edinburgh People's Festival Ceilidh* provide considerable historical data about the event. Introductory notes are heavily supplemented with short excerpts from radio interviews, newspaper articles, and published reminiscences by people who organized or witnessed the first People's Festival Ceilidh. McVicar, a storyteller and singer, provides brief biographical sketches of all the performers. He precedes almost every song with information about its history, other recorded or published versions, alternative titles, or explanations of the lyrics' meaning. While I wish Bennett had provided similar information in her liner notes, I also wish McVicar had provided more contextual information about the songs, as Bennett did. Where did the singers learn their songs? Where, when, and why did they usually perform them? How might the singers describe or classify their repertoire? Who chose the songs to be performed and why? I was also surprised that, for all that key organizers, revival activists, and audience members are quoted in the liner notes, the singers themselves are quite silent. What did they think about the People's Ceilidh, and what convinced them to participate? What did they think of the developing folk revival? And despite the excellent historical data provided in the liner notes, I was disappointed that no recommended reading list is provided for the Scots song traditions and folk revival, although Morag NicLeod does provide a useful reading list for Gaelic songs.

As an ethnomusicologist, I would be remiss not to mention the lack of discussion in the liner notes of musical elements, particularly since Lomax is famous for the musical analysis he later practiced. What might cantometrics reveal about these songs? I was also struck by several items that have a form typically associated with waulking/milling songs but that are

not identified as such on *Gaelic Songs of Scotland*, such as “A Fhleasgaich Ùir Leannainn Thu”/“Young Man I’d Follow You” (identified as a song about shieling life) and “Bidh an Deoch-s’ air Làimh Mo Rùin”/“This Drink Shall Be to the Hand of My Love” (identified as a spinning song). Indeed, it would be helpful to know more about the song forms on these CDs and how they relate to their performance contexts. At the same time, I am very grateful that the labor songs were recorded while accompanying work. Thus, one can hear the milking of the cows accompanying milking songs and the sound of the spinning wheel accompanying spinning songs. There are many recorded and published milking and spinning songs, but rarely have I had the opportunity to hear how their rhythm and phrasing relate to the rhythms and sounds of their related activities.

In the process of bringing to light aspects of Scottish song and culture not previously available commercially, these recordings raise intriguing questions and suggest that there is still much room for research on Lomax’s fieldwork. Of course, liner notes are limited in the amount of information they can provide without surpassing the physical limitations of a jewel case. Overall, these are two wonderful audio and print resources for anyone interested in Scottish songs. They complement other existing commercial archive recordings, such as the comprehensive Scottish Tradition series on the Green-trax label. The series now numbers nineteen recordings and presents examples of Scottish oral culture from songs to instrumental music and storytelling, and it represents many regions, from the Gaelic Hebrides in the west to the northeast, and from Orkney and the Shetlands in the north to the southern Borders. Surprisingly, however, the Scottish Tradition series does not have a CD devoted to Gaelic work songs, except for *Waulking Songs from Barra*. In contrast, *Gaelic Songs of Scotland* includes a variety of labor songs as well as waulking songs from Benbecula, Barra, and South Uist. The Scottish Tradition series also tends to take a conservative approach to traditional material, and therefore nowhere is there a recording of an urban folk festival concert. These two CDs, issued by Rounder, are of superb sound quality, have helpful liner notes, represent song tradi-

tions from across the country, and are an excellent addition to the Alan Lomax Collection.

It’s Time for Another One: Folksongs from the South Coast of Newfoundland—Ramea and Grole, 2005. Produced by Beverley Diamond. Research Centre for the Study of Music, Media, and Place (MMAp), Memorial University of Newfoundland, CD (1), n.n.

I. SHELDON POSEN
Canadian Museum of Civilization

In 1967 and 1968, Jesse Fudge from Grole, a small fishing community on Hermitage Bay on the south coast of Newfoundland, was taking classes for a B.A. in English and folklore at Memorial University. Fudge was on leave from his teaching job in Ramea, a community close to Grole. For his folksong assignments from Herbert Halpert and Neil Rosenberg, Fudge recorded singers in Grole and Ramea, and submitted the tapes, transcripts, and a report. As was routine with student materials, the collection wound up in the university’s Folklore and Language Archive.

Audio and print excerpts from the Fudge collection comprise the heart of *It’s Time for Another One: Folksongs from the South Coast of Newfoundland—Ramea and Grole*, a CD-and-booklet package produced in 2005 by the Research Centre for the Study of Music, Media, and Place (MMAp) at Memorial. MMAp is headed by ethnomusicologist Beverley Diamond. According to the back cover of the CD booklet, MMAp’s mission is “to initiate and enable music research within the academic and general community.” *It’s Time for Another One* is the first of a series of MMAp offerings of Newfoundland song materials of various provenances and eras.

The package offers two audio components: the field recordings (a brief instrumental passage, some fourteen song performances, and four short tracks of talk relating to some of the performances) and “rearrangements” of three of the field-recorded songs commissioned by MMAp, all performed by musicians now working in the Newfoundland music scene. There is also a forty-page booklet with excellent intro-