

A Life of Song, The Autobiography of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser (1857-1930)

By Marjory Kennedy-Fraser

Islands Book Trust

Review by Anne Lorne-Gillies

“There is music which reminds one of great forests, of wind and unbridled ocean; there is music, by no means inferior, which reminds one of gilded chairs and the court of *Le Grand Monarque*; and there is music which reminds one of nothing so much as of too much underwear and too many waistcoats...” wrote Ezra Pound in *The New Age* in 1919.

According to Pound, Marjory Kennedy-Fraser’s song collection *Songs of the Hebrides* (published in several volumes from 1909) belonged firmly to the first category: “These traditional melodies of the Gael are among the musical riches of all time, and one need use no comparatives and no tempered adjectives to express the matter. They have in them the wildness of the sea and of the wind and the shrillness of the sea-birds, and whether they will pass away utterly with the present industrious collector I am unable to say”.

To most Gaelic noses, I suspect, Marjory Kennedy-Fraser’s arrangements smell more of the gilded chairs and waistcoats. And most Gaelic-speakers, I’m sure, would argue that the obstinate refusal of their culture to “pass away utterly” owes little to the industry of Kennedy-Fraser.

Her autobiography, *A Life of Song*, was first published in 1929 and reprinted in paperback five years ago by the Grian Press, Paisley. Now the Islands Trust has brought us yet another edition. The blurb on the back cover describes Kennedy-Fraser as “one of the most important collectors and popularisers of Gaelic song at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries”, but acknowledges that her work does not appeal to everyone: “her arrangements of these traditional songs, undertaken with the Rev. Kenneth MacLeod, were...criticised for departing from the authentic settings of the songs, and her reputation has suffered as a result.” This, it promises, will be tackled in a “long overdue re-evaluation of (Kennedy-Fraser’s) contribution to the recording and preservation of Gaelic song” by Dr Per Ahlander, Research Fellow at the University of Edinburgh, who has elsewhere described Kennedy-Fraser as “musician, cultural entrepreneur, suffragette and musicologist”, so he is obviously no stranger to the art of snake-poking.

Having now read her autobiography on three separate occasions I’m sure I would have got on like a house on fire with Marjory Kennedy-Fraser – as long as we kept off the

subject of Gaelic songs. (Which I think we could have managed quite easily, for the first forty years of her life at least.)

Who could not marvel at the intrepid twelve year-old Marjory who sets off to play pianoforte accompaniment for her father, a celebrated Scots tenor called David Kennedy, on a prolonged concert tour that turns her adolescence into a blur? From city concert halls to barns in remote villages, Marjory (with parents, siblings and piano in tow) splashes, splashes, slithers, rides bareback and, when all else fails, walks across fords, ravines, sands and quagmires to bring echoes of “their ain folk” to home-sick ex-pat Scots in every corner of the British Empire. Who could not gasp as the student Marjory puts her voice in the hands of fearsome French and Italian singing teachers, or sympathise when a cruel accident burns down the Opera House in Nice killing three of her siblings, and illness carries off first her heart-broken father (mid-tour in Canada) and then her supportive husband, leaving her with two infants to rear? Who could not admire the feisty Edwardian widow who keeps the wolf from the door by teaching singing and piano, writing music reviews and delivering lecture-recitals, and is rewarded by a CBE, a Civil List pension and an honorary doctorate from the University of Edinburgh?

It was in 1905, after her husband’s death, that it began to dawn on Kennedy-Fraser that her life’s mission was to collect traditional songs from the Outer Hebrides and preserve them for future generations; a true vocation – or perhaps a more pragmatic motive: interest in all things Celtic / Romantic / Folkloristic was running high across Europe, and Gaelic song was a virtually untapped resource with which to take her musical career in a new direction. She had already learned to sing a few Gaelic songs in her youth, her interest apparently aroused by what she calls her “racial” background: her father’s great grandfather fought at Culloden in the days before “the Gaelic tongue, in which had been embedded the ideals of heroism and the chivalry of Celtic story, became a byword and a reproach”; and of course a Gaelic song or two, arranged for female trio, would be useful for the Kennedy sisters to perform on tour.

Then again, in the 1880s, when preparing a lecture-series on songs and songwriters, she had bravely (or presumptuously) decided to include a lecture-recital on Celtic music. As one would imagine, this required some effort to prepare: “I had to look up and produce uncommon and typical examples of Irish, Cornish, Welsh, Manx, Breton and Scottish song...” But her ambition to “do original research work in Celtic music” was really kick-started by her close friend the Celtic symbolist artist John Duncan (who, I cannot resist saying, purported to hear faeries singing while he worked) when he “discovered, as it were”

the Island of Eriskay. The irony is Kennedy-Fraser's, I should point out – she obviously had a good sense of humour – as is the alarming lack of it in her bald statement that “From Eriskay I had brought with me a good haul of unpublished melodies to add to the existing traditional music-lore of Scotland”. (And this after one all-too-short visit!) But haste was of the essence, for an American song-collector had been prowling around Eriskay and was already halfway across the Atlantic with her bounty!

Thus on her return to Edinburgh Kennedy-Fraser inserted a *Visit to the Outer Hebrides and Celtic music* into her syllabus of forthcoming lecture-recitals. As the date approached and nobody had as yet supplied her with lyrics for this first “haul” of melodies, she hurriedly concocted “English translations” based upon her memories of a few weeks’ spent as a visitor in a Hebridean island. Kennedy-Fraser’s enthusiasm for her material is not in doubt. But circumstances forced her to be, first and foremost, a career woman. The success of her first recital persuaded her to go back to the Islands again. Several more song-collecting forays ensued and many more concert recitals, culminating in an invitation from a London company to publish *Songs of the Hebrides*. (They appeared in several volumes from 1909.) It was at this point that she was forced to enlist the help of a Gaelic editor, the Rev. Kenneth MacLeod, a knowledgeable enough man but a disastrous choice in my opinion. For instead of providing a Gaelic counter-balance MacLeod proved himself able to rarify the earthiest stories and out-whimsy Kennedy-Fraser herself.

Perhaps we should not judge these two collaborators against the ethical standards that determine today’s ethnomusicological practice, though the Folksong Society was already producing work of integrity, including that of another Gaelic collector, Frances Tolmie. But previous generations of Scots “collectors” (notably MacPherson, but also Scott, Hogg and even Burns) had enhanced their reputations and satisfied the public appetite for antiquity and romance by passing off their own poetry – and / or “improved” versions of ancient fragments – as long-lost examples of “oral tradition”. And Kennedy-Fraser was sucked into this whirlpool before she’d had time to whisper “Pelleas et Melisande”. While Frances Tolmie’s collection of genuine Gaelic songs and related traditions remained on the shelf, as quietly unassuming as its author, Kennedy-Fraser’s lavish collections won their two authors the admiration of artists, literati and “Celtic” enthusiasts throughout the British Isles and elsewhere. Before long the Anglo-Irish poet Alfred Percival Graves was describing Kennedy-Fraser as “the leading collector of, and artistic authority upon Gaelic song” and the lady herself was writing a training pamphlet on how to perform the genre: *Hebridean Song and the laws of interpretation*.

Meanwhile the hosts of the Scottish Renaissance, under their leader Hugh MacDiarmid, were already beginning to prowl and growl around. And soon the young poet Sorley Maclean was inveighing against the “travesties of Gaelic songs” that Kennedy-Fraser had conjured out of the mists of “a Celtic Twilight (that) never bore any earthly relation to anything in Gaelic life or literature: a cloudy mysticism lapped up by old ladies of the Anglo-Saxon bourgeoisie in the drawing-rooms of Edinburgh and London”. And the lines have been clearly drawn between these two camps ever since.

As Dr Per Ahlander suggests in his Introduction to *A Life of Song*, there is much to be said on both sides. On the one hand Kennedy-Fraser was one of the first British song-collectors to make mechanical recordings of Gaelic songs (with, one should emphasise, the help of able and educated Island community leaders like Annie Johnson of Barra and her brother Calum). On the other, having carefully carried her fragile “graphophone” to the Outer Hebrides, can she easily be forgiven for openly and unrepentantly “processing” this “raw material” into (to quote Professor Tovey of Edinburgh University) “settings that would find wide acceptance among music lovers other than those disposed to confine their attention to primitive music...” That she did much more than a little genteel re-arranging is clear from the original wax cylinder recordings which were conserved in Edinburgh University and have since been transferred onto tape by the School of Scottish Studies. Perhaps it may be difficult for the uninitiated to make a meaningful comparison between the fine printed scores in *Songs of the Hebrides* and the “the crack-voiced crooning of an old crone into a tape-machine” (to quote the journalist Maurice Lindsay). But in the 1980s, having been commissioned by BBC Radio Scotland to learn and sing both versions (“primitive” from the tapes and “refined” from the books) I was able to demonstrate the extent and nature of the changes she made to many of the songs.

Again, her inability to speak Gaelic language may explain her own cavalier attitude towards the words of the songs she collected, not to mention her reliance upon the fanciful poetic inventions of her collaborator, but it certainly does not excuse them. As she said herself in *Hebridean Song and the laws of interpretation*, “First study your words. What do they mean? What is the atmosphere, the mood, that gave them birth?” Unfortunately it is often impossible to discern their native qualities at all beneath the romantic veneer with which they are painted.

To distil Dr Ahlander’s considered arguments down to a paragraph or two is unfair, but his central plank seems to be a plea for critics to cease judging Kennedy-Fraser’s work as reworked Gaelic songs and begin classifying them as original art songs – “a repertoire

intended to be performed in recitals by trained voices, usually to piano accompaniment". He quotes a tribute written at the time of her death by a Gaelic spokesperson, who waxes almost biblical in his efforts to put a gloss on received wisdom: "(Marjory Kennedy-Fraser) created art song which was a new creation... and the new form which arose out of the beautiful Gaelic melodies was the art song".

If we still don't like Kennedy-Fraser's songs, Dr Ahlander suggests that we should "ask ourselves whether we like the art song genre per se." This is rather too facile for me. For I have performed art songs all my life: Haydn, Mozart, Schubert, Schumann, Fauré, Bizet, de Falla, Obradors... Not to mention Harty's Anglo-Irish songs and Canteloube's *Songs of the Auvergne*. So why do the Kennedy-Fraser songs set my teeth on edge? Is it the quality of her composition – not in comparison, odious or otherwise, with their Gaelic counterparts but in comparison with the art-songs of her contemporaries: Debussy, say, or Berlioz, or Hahn? Conversely, how do they compare with the "folk-song arrangements" of contemporary composers like Vaughan Williams or Harty or Canteloube? How far removed are her songs from "the atmosphere, the mood, that gave them birth" in comparison with, say, *My Laggan Love* or *She Moved thro' the Fair*? Do the surviving Auvergnat Occitan speakers cringe every time another soprano records "their folk songs"? (We know that the Spanish cringed at Bizet's *Carmen* while the rest of the world applauded.) Does "whack with a too ra loo ra laddy" irritate the Irish Gaelic speaker as much as "feesha fasha fo" or "hin hin haradala" irritates me? Is all forgiven when the Dubliners grab Harty's *Spanish Lady* by the scruff of her dirty neck, or Anne Martin fills Kennedy-Fraser's *Island Shieling Song* with genuine memories of summer in Skye?

And what of Dr Ahlander's claim that, at the very least, Kennedy-Fraser's songs served to preserve and popularise Gaelic music? Certainly some of her songs became part of the standard repertoire of many celebrated performers, including the Orpheus Choir, Paul Robeson, Kenneth Mackellar, The Corries, The Seekers and Lisa Milne – but none of them sang / sing in Gaelic. And however "industrious" her collecting work may have been, it does not seem to have inspired any sustained support for Gaelic culture, or for the people who conveyed it safely from generation to generation long before, and long after, Marjory Kennedy-Fraser visited their islands. As John Lorne Campbell remarked in 1950:

"Until the Irish Folklore Commission sent a whole-time collector to the Hebrides with an Ediphone in 1946, no learned body or institute of any kind had taken any interest whatever in recording and preserving the folksongs and oral literature of the islands; an astonishing fact

when it is considered that the Outer Hebrides is one of the richest storehouses of folk music and folklore in Western Europe today.”

A couple of last “housekeeping” niggles: I do wish the Islands Book Trust had commissioned someone to annotate and index *A Life of Song*, and also that they had persuaded the designer to re-appraise its front cover before publication. A photograph of the Sleat Peninsula is superimposed with line-drawings by Marjory Kennedy-Fraser’s daughter Patuffa: a map of “the Hebrid (sic) Isles” surrounded by suitably Hebridean paraphernalia – galleys, a spinning wheel, a harp... and a thatched cottage that arises out of the sea with what looks like a telegraph pole protruding from its roof! I hope somebody has warned CalMac.

Anne Lorne Gillies is a Scottish singer, songwriter, broadcaster, author and academic. Her own collection, *Songs of Gaelic Scotland*, Birlinn, 2005, is now available in paperback from Amazon and all good booksellers