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Bunting, Jaime D., "The Role of Women in Traditional Scottish Song" (2019). *Music Class Publications*. 1.
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The University of Edinburgh

Topical Essay

The Role of Women in Traditional Scottish Song

Spring 2019

Traditional Song - Scots

By: Jaime D. Bunting

Music is a looking-glass into cultural contexts. While timeless, genres of song are like time capsules swirling with people's thoughts and emotions of far off times and places, and when studied, these emotions are reflected back to the listener. Furthermore, song, and the lyrics they claim, provide insight into the norms of language and how the way of expressing thoughts of the world has changed over time. It can also provide insight into specific issues, such as gender and gender norms, and how they have progressed.

Looking through the lens of gender, this essay briefly discusses the historical role of women in Scottish traditional song, the actions they took to make a space for themselves within the tradition, how they found empowerment through these actions, and ways that these issues are still relevant in modern contexts of traditional song. Through these points, it also aims to explain why it is important to look at Scots song within this perspective: looking at contexts through different lenses can lead to new, and deeper interpretations.

Much Contribution, Little Recognition:

Historically, women have been attributed a passive role in traditional Scottish music. This is not to say that women did not have an *active role*, but rather the ways in which societal norms were set up they were *seen* as only performers of Scots song, as opposed to *formal actors* in creating tradition. This stems from how they were viewed in wider society, and the gendered roles they were ascribed, such as the "wife-figure" who simply cooks, cleans, and cares for children. Consequently, the physical space and concept of "home" become associated with femininity, as masculinity was associated with being formal actors "out in the world" (Barclay, 87-88). In other words, a women's "place" in society was of private life, rather than public, and so their creative contributions to traditional Scottish song were widely over-looked.

Though the home and private life is retreat from the outside world, for women in the patriarchal household, it was often a form of oppression. This oppression was found in the form of social expectations imposed upon women and in the power dynamics between husband and wife (Radner, 31). Women had to juggle outside expectations with the internal ones of a husband (husbands who often held great social power over their wives). In such instances, women would often turn to creative expression as an escape, which Joan Radner in her work, *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture*, pens as "coding". As Radner puts nicely, "a woman's creative skills may offer her an outlet for domestic frustration (Radner, 32)." A means of creative expression for woman was thus found in music and song. The term "coding" is used to imply that women kept their frustrations and protests secret, in fear of divorce, abuse, and leaving "conventional role expectations" unfulfilled (Radner, 31).

Despite this restricted role in society, however, women were still integral members of the Scottish folk tradition. Though they often had to find creative ways in attempts to navigate these norms and maintain social acceptance, examples discussed within this section show that women played a significant role in the passing down, creation, and preservation of Scottish song.

One of the greatest examples of this preservation is the Harris Sisters. The sisters, Amelia and Jane, born in Perthshire, Scotland, have helped pass along folk ballads from a "distinctly female line oral tradition" (Rieuwerts. 666). Beginning with their grandmother and her nurse, the sisters learned these tunes from the women in their lives. When given the opportunity to help preserve this familial line, Jane and Amelia, wrote down and compiled these tunes into two manuscripts, sharing them over the years with William Aytoun, Peter Buchanan, and Francis James Child. It is said that in Child's, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, twenty-three of the fifty-five ballads featured were those from the Harris sisters. The

manuscripts not only preserved the ballads, but they provided extensive materials for research into the folk tradition (Rieuwerts, 667).

So it can be said that the Harris sisters hold a significant place in the Scottish folk tradition. The interesting thing to point out here, however, is that in order for their knowledge to be heard, they had to go through a line of men for it to be further compiled and approved. This takes away from the distinct line of females whom originally passed along the tunes, while also lessening the credit given to the Harris sisters. Therefore, the sisters were brave in coming forward with their authentic knowledge and putting it in the hands of someone else to handle. They could have been rejected, or had their work taken from them, but they took bold steps, showing their passion to preserve the music that had been a part of who they and their family were for generations.

Going off of this, it can also be shown that women contributed greatly to the creation of Scot's song, but, due to their place in society, felt it better to not claim the work as their own in hopes of not facing societal consequences (hence a form of "coding"). This can be seen through the life of Carolina Oliphant, later becoming known as Lady Nairne. Lady Nairne, being born in 1766 to a household involved with the Jacobite rebellions, already held a risky place in society (Donaldson). She then later chose to marry a captain in the British army, further complicating her situation (McGurik, 271). Nairne wrote an extensive amount of Scots song, contributing to both the overall tradition of Scottish music, as well as that of Jacobitism. Carol McGurik, in her written work, discusses the contributions of Lady Nairne alongside Robert Burns, implying the two holding similar significance in the tradition. McGurik calls her an "active reconstructor" of folk music, exemplifying how she is partly responsible for shaping it into its popularized form that has been spread through generations (255).

Lady Narine's contributions were not always realized, though, and are still not fully realized as the "exact extent of her work and its links with the rest of the tradition have never been clearly established. There is no reliable critical edition (Donaldson). The main reason for this is because of her attempts to conceal her identity in her writing. She often signed her work with quips such as "Mrs. Bogan of Bogan", "Sent by B.B", "S.M.", "Unknown", or "Anonymous". By doing so, she kept her creative work secret, while also suggesting to listeners and readers that she was a man (McGuirik, 256-257).

There are many speculations as to why Lady Nairne chose to do this. The main one being relevant here, though, is that she feared the social repercussions on her and her family from her identified being exposed. If her sympathies towards Jacobite causes were known, this would not bode well with her husband, a member of the British Army. It would reflect back on her as deviating from the "wife figure" under her husband's control. Also, knowingly being a creative contributor would likely have been seen as deviating from the expectation of women to stay out of the public sphere. Whatever the case is, however, her actions greatly reduced her "visibility as an author", even so today (McGuirik, 259). Because of these gendered roles, her creative work and voice was not able to be heard freely. Despite this, she still created work in the way she saw best and created a space for herself in the tradition. Now that her work is more realized as her own, it shows that a woman has been one of the greatest contributors to Scottish traditional music, in a context that would have disapproved of her in this role.

Empowerment Through Choice:

Much of traditional Scottish song centers around storytelling. The topic of the story, the length of it, and the language and vocabulary used, all depend upon the genre of Scots song. This being said, however, no matter the story being told, each carries with it a deep history of Scottish culture. Music from a given time is often a good indicator of the wider views of society at that time, expressed through the messages embedded within the music. This is true for Scottish folk song, which often times further perpetuated ideas of male domination, violence, and the gender roles mentioned earlier. Prominent examples of these are “The Cruel Brither”, “Pretty Polly”, and “Wee Copper of Fife” (Wollstadt).

There is a theme, however, showing that woman in Scots song went against the grain of these norms and often chose to sing songs that were exceptions to the lyrical content of male domination and female oppression. Lynn Wollstadt unpacks this point in her work, “Controlling Women: Reading Gender in the Ballads Scottish Women Sang.” Through case studies of songs most popularly sung by traditional female folk artists, she shows that women were seemingly intentional in the songs they chose to sing, choosing ones that either flipped the normal gender roles on their head or played with the idea of women taking control of their own situations.

An example showing these both to be true is “Mill O’ Tifty’s Annie”. In this ballad, Annie falls in love with Andrew Lammie, a trumpeter belonging to a lower class than herself. Her father severely disapproves, leading him to kill her out of anger. Before her death the ballad, in Annie’s perspective, goes “Love comes in at my bedside”, referring to Andrew Lammie (Wollstadt, 301-304).

Two aspects stick out from this, the first being that though her father is the one who took her life, Annie was first given the choice to follow her father’s wishes and marry someone from

her own social standing. She instead chose to maintain control of her life in the way she could, stick with her original decision of whom to love, and then face the consequences. This was her own choice. The other thing to point out here is the way Andrew Lammie is portrayed. In the ballad, he is seen as having less power than a woman. He also returns to Annie's bedside before she passes, painting him as emotional and sympathetic. Both of these go against the normal portrayal of a male love-interest in a ballad.

In Emily Lyles *Collection of Scottish Ballad*, thirty-five of forty-seven ballads contain male romantic figurers who are in high positions of power such as "gentlemen", "lords", and "knights", leaving only six in which males are in a weaker role (Wollstadt, 296). This is to say that it would take a greater deal of effort for women to choose songs such as "Mill O' Tifty's Annie", implying that there was intention behind this. Perhaps women enjoyed exploring the idea of taking control and the consequences they may face for breaking societal norms. Or possibly, they were more sympathetic to male characters in positions of weakness because it went against the stigma of women being in this role.

Evolution – Stepping Out, but Still More Road to Go:

Rachel Newtown, noted as an interpreter of traditional Scottish folk music and BBC's 2017 Radio Folk Musician of the Year, provides a contemporary outlook on the role of women in Scottish folk music – exemplifying empowerment while also advocating awareness on gendered issues that still prevail. Newton, actively pushing against the historical stigma of women only being singers in traditional music, writes and arranges her own music, and plays many instruments such as fiddle, viola, and harp. Newton was also awarded in 2016 with the Hands Up for Traditional Ignition Award for Innovation, showing commitment to keeping the tradition alive and relevant (About). While Newton does solo performances, she is also a

founding member of The Shee: an all-female band who creatively combines “folk Gaelic and American music”, each member holding an extensive list of musical credentials (The Band).

While the above is a story of progress, representation, and empowerment for women in traditional Scottish folk music, that is not to say that there is not still room for improvement, or evidence of sexism in the industry. Rachel Newton, even with winning numerous awards and playing a center stage role in the contemporary tradition, discusses this in her own article, answering the question, “Why is live Scottish traditional music dominated by men?”. Newton believes that inequality for women is an issue that exists in the music industry, and beyond, and has had first-hand witness and experience with this (Newton).

Newton points to the lack of female representation in the Scottish Traditional Music Awards, noting that in the “Live Act of the Year” category, only three of a total thirty-nine band members were women. She also reminisces on the time The Shee was turned away from a performance because the “girl band” was already taken care of. Throughout, she raises a few more questions with perplexion, such as why a women’s role as a “headliner” is most often accompanied by all males (an issue since the tradition came into existence), why women who take the same education path in folk music are often not met with the same success in later career, and why the Bevvie Sisters are only “one of the few Scottish traditional music acts not dominated by men (Newton). She acknowledges that more research needs to be done to fully answer these. Newton then took public action by sparking a discussion on Facebook and holding a forum at the Celtic Connections Festival on “Exploring Music and Gender”. Here, Newton is using the platform that she has to bring awareness and call for action to further progress the role of women in the tradition, despite the consequences it may have on her public image and career.

There has still been progress, however, mainly in the ability of women to take claim of their own voice which, exemplified earlier, historically has not been the case. Also, like the article shows, these issues being brought up allows a discussion to occur, which is a step forward. With awareness, when action is taken, comes change. Women having the opportunity to publicly have their opinions heard, like Newton's Facebook post, article, music forum, and musical career, is a step in the right direction. Lastly, she says, "as someone who loves traditional music and has grown up in a music scene that often feels like an extended family, I think we do ourselves more damage if we don't assess things critically and try to make positive changes (Newton).

An article posted to BBC News within the past two years also brings up a few interesting questions. In his article, "Women on Song for Celtic Connections", Steven Brocklehurst writes of the Celtic Connections Festival that took place in Glasgow in 2017. Brocklehurst follows quotes of Donald Shaw, the director of the festival, who openly applauds the number of "strong female artists" that participated in the festival that year. He echoes the point made by Newton in her article, that there has been recent controversy surrounding past awards shows and their lack of a female artist presence (Brocklehurst). Donald Shaw states, "the time seemed right to raise the role of women in music", which is interesting considering he has been the festivals director for over a decade. Why was the time not right until now? Why not earlier, before the controversy became part of popular discourse? Also, while it is good and important to acknowledge and celebrate women's success in music, why is it still noteworthy for there to be a strong female presence at a particular award show, and not part of the norm?

All of this being said, it is important to look at things with a different perspective, whether they be current events or a historical tradition. Doing this allows for views to emerge

that may have never been realized before. Within the past few decades, there has been a “gradual accumulation of a corpus of wide-ranging and innovative research, exploring the material and discursive contexts of Scots women and men’s lives across all the time periods (Barclay, 83). Again, this points in a positive direction. Looking at Scottish history with gender issues in mind, has changed the narrative of history and allowed it to become a way of learning from past events.

In the 2013 edition of *The Scottish Historical Review*, Katie Barclay writes an article assessing how this has been done recently. She too, though, concludes with three points describing how there is still work to be done. Firstly, “large gaps” still exists in the historical accounts and research findings in gender studies. Secondly, it is still an uncommon approach for Scottish historians to take. Lastly, it may be needed to look beyond Scottish history itself to continue discovering the role that women played in Scottish society and culture (Barclay, 100-107). The extent of women’s role in the tradition of Scottish folk music is therefore not yet fully known.

Concluding Thoughts:

Looking specifically at traditional Scottish song, it is apparent that the content of Scots song perpetuated societal views of women that attempted to keep them within gendered roles, while at the same time, some women used song to take control of their own narrative, finding empowerment through the roles they played in transmission and creation of song, and the songs they chose to sing. While women’s equality has progressed significantly over the decades, it is still being sorted through, with forward motions of women’s empowerment and slight backsliding expressed through ways that equality could still be improved. The increasing practice of looking back at historical interpretations with gender issues in mind has allowed for

these points to emerge. Without this, new interpretations of Scottish songs and ballads, and the significant role of women in the Scottish folk tradition - such as the Harris Sisters and Lady Nairne - would not be known. All of this to say, women have used the means available to them (in this case music and song), in the circumstances they were given, to take control of their lives which have historically tried to be restricted.

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