

## Folk ~ Music

Stuart Eydmann

*Stuart Eydmann performs, researches, and writes on Scottish vernacular music and is particularly concerned with aspects of the revivals of the twentieth century. He was a lecturer on traditional music history at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama and on popular music at the Open University, and both Post-Doctoral Research Fellow and Traditional Artist in Residence at the School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh. He is a post-graduate tutor at Edinburgh College of Art and curator of the online audio archive [raretones.org](http://raretones.org).*

This photographic essay is offered as a reflective gallery space among the text-based debate, ideas, arguments, and opinions in this special edition.

On 14 August 1985, I had a falling out with my friend and fellow musician and musicologist David Johnson (1942-2009), on account of a review I had written of his seminal book *Scottish Fiddle Music in the Eighteenth Century* for the journal *Cencrastus*. I remember the precise date, as David chose to challenge me on the matter while we sat together waiting nervously in the green room at the Queens Hall, minutes before we were to take the stage in *Mr Menuhin's Delight*, an Edinburgh International Festival concert of Scottish fiddle music.

David had taken umbrage at my criticism of a line in his book's conclusion that dismissed what he termed the modern 'peasant myth' of the folk music through which 'mendicant players' and musical agricultural labourers, 'whom there was a fashion for photographing, standing with instruments outside cowsheds', had become the representatives of tradition at the expense of more elite and technically accomplished musicians. In countering this, I had suggested that Followers of the 'People's Past' school would remind him that the players were proudly displaying their most prized possessions and means of escape within a harsh living environment" and that "the 'cowsheds', of course, were their homes".

We patched up our friendship some years later, but not before I had committed myself to working with the photographic record, and exploring the potential of this resource in understanding otherwise submerged aspects of our popular and traditional music.

More recently, in winter 2019, I viewed the excellent exhibition of a selection of material from the MacKinnon Collection of photographs that was held at the National Portrait Gallery of Scotland. I was disappointed, however, to find only a few images that featured musical subjects. More satisfactory, for my interests at least, was my visit to the exhibition *Glean: Early 20th Century women filmmakers and photographers in Scotland* at the City Art Centre,

Edinburgh, in the winter of 2022-23, after which I was stimulated to take a more structured approach to the modest collection of music-related images that I have collected over the years, some of which I share here.

Prior to the widespread adoption of technology-based sound capture and the commercial distribution of its results by the end of the first quarter of the twentieth century, the production of *any* music always involved action by real people, there and then. Performers and consumers before the coming of records, radio, television and other media, were no less musical than those of today and no less in need of music to accompany the rituals and events of their daily lives. Their demands supported a range of amateur, semi-professional and professionals who would provide services as required, but there was also much do-it-yourself music-making when resources allowed acquisition and conservation of instruments. In the latter decades of the nineteenth century, increased commercial availability of a vast range of inexpensive instruments, enabled by industrial mass-production and distribution by modern transportation, combined with increased disposable income and leisure time to make musical participation by those of every class, age, gender and place, truly accessible for the first time.

Musical instruments, from the humble penny whistle to the parlour piano, became symbols of status, aspiration, talent and artistic engagement, or treasured possessions essential to personal, family, social and community life. This wave of new participation coincided with an increased popularity in the use of photography.

The following photographs are all drawn from my own personal collection and are published here for the first time. Most are from the period 1880 to 1930 and they mainly feature amateur musicians from Scotland, although some are from England and Ireland. All the subjects are anonymous and the musical, personal and social circumstances of their creation are not known with any certainty. It can be assumed that most were taken for, or by, family and friends. We can only speculate on the roles and status of those portrayed from clues in their dress, pose and settings.

I have matched each image with a quotation. Like the photographs, these are from a variety of sources and contexts, some quite obscure. They do not relate directly to the images they accompany but have been selected to stimulate reflection on the content of the image, on the historic roles of popular and traditional music and on the concept of arts and culture for all.



## 1

*First and foremost, a professional performer should go to a first-class teacher of Department, a man of culture, not a pedant; failing that there are opportunities of seeing Shakespeare's characters, how they sail gracefully on and off the boards. Enter with a smile, not too pronounced, not jaunty nor sheepish, but just as Shakespeare says, "holding up the mirror to nature." Don't irritate your audience by screwing pegs and breaking strings.*



## 2

*Teaching on the pipes might be discouraged, however, or even withheld from women. The traditional singer Lizzie Higgins, daughter of the famous Jeannie Robertson, was passionately fond of pipe music, and despite her father's opposition was secretly taught by her uncles. When her father found out, he burnt her chanter, declaring that 'he would have no she-pipers in his house'. In return, he systematically taught her the traditional song repertoire, hour after hour, nuance after nuance, as a result of which she became a leading interpreter of traditional balladry in a style strongly influenced by pipe tradition. Others have been less fortunate. In its early years the College of Piping [founded 1948] refused to take female pupils.*



### 3

*A number of vagrants went round regularly among the people, who were cheerfully welcomed, and in no instance were any of them refused admittance. Some of these beggars amused people with stories and songs, and could repeat many of Ossian's poems, many of them having extraordinary memories. The people were very glad when any of them came that way and made every effort at being successful in getting them to their houses, and the neighbours would assemble at night to hear their stories. Some of them could play the bagpipes and fiddle.*



## 4

*Jean-Jaques Rousseau in the 1750s had extolled the virtues of peasant culture, claiming that unlettered countrymen lived closer to basics than educated townsmen did, and that this was manifest in the way countrymen expressed themselves in words and music. It was inevitable that moves would be made to identify Scots fiddling, also, as a primitive peasant culture.*

*Trained European musicians living in Scotland despised Scots fiddling, almost to a man; and the general public saw agricultural labourers (whom there was a fashion for photographing, standing with instruments outside cowsheds) and mendicant players... as the most typical representatives of the tradition.*



## 5

*The most popular instrument for social dancing in Scotland before 1914 was undoubtedly the fiddle, and at that time there were first-class dance fiddlers in every district in Scotland. These men, however, are fast dying out, and fiddling is now in danger of becoming a lost art.*

*In the countryside before 1914, the music for kirns and weddings and for the smaller dances in the villages was usually supplied by one or two fiddlers. Only at 'balls' was a band provided.*



## 6

*Possibly nothing is more conducive towards innocent and mirthful recreation in the family than music. In the present day no home may be said to be complete without a Melodeon – with a melodeon in the house, if there is no member of the family who can already play it, one or more will soon learn. It will effect the introduction of music into the household with all its benefits, helping and enticing to sing as well as play. It will make a home more attractive, and thus save more expensive and dangerous amusements; consider the pleasure of familiar home songs in the evening, in which voices and hearts unite, and of the sacred songs on the Sabbath. No other instrument presents such fitness, attractiveness and practicality for this purpose as the melodeon. Within the compass of the instrument it is simply perfect, and so easy to play that anyone with no knowledge of music can with an hour's practice play upon it the most popular songs of the day.*





7

*I used to be able to look over to Kintyre, to Campbeltown, to Islay, from where I grew up. We have some migrant versions of Scottish songs in Ulster; usually they have been matched up with a different melody and words altered, but that is the tradition. It's a living tradition and that is what makes it so fascinating that you have all these variations of songs. It's been a lifelong fascination of mine and I can't imagine life without having that interest.*



## 8

*The people called it a foy, or as it is called in other parts of Scotland a ploy. Beginning with the head of the family, everyone in the circle was expected to make a contribution to the entertainment of the evening with a song, a dance or a tune on the melodeon, the violin or the mouth organ. The old Scotch Songs that never grow old were sung with a right royal will, and the dances, 'hornpipes, jigs, strathspeys and reels', were given with an enthusiasm that showed that the day's work had not affected the 'life and mettle in their heels'. There was no drink that might till the very end and Auld Lang Syne was sung with the merry wistfulness that betokens the flight of memory over the days that are gone...*



9

*I have trained a good many lady violinists in my time and consider them well adapted to the instrument. Their fingers and wrists are generally more supple than those of the other sex, but their bowing is in most cases not so powerful.*



10

*... however valuable the piano may be used as a means of musical education, there are other instruments usually less expensive and certainly more portable, that are popularly associated with the very large body of Scottish traditional dance music – bagpipes, fiddle, melodeon, and even the mouth-organ.*

*Promising beginnings were made before the war [WW2], and it may be that the application of new teaching techniques will make Scotland once again a land of fiddlers and preserve what is in danger of being lost; the great tradition of Scottish reels, strathspeys and other folk dances.*



11

*He belongs to the countryside where there are no teachers, so he has to experiment by himself and learn what he can from the nearest fiddler... he does not need to read music, and as his is a much narrower field than that of the violinist, he can often achieve his purpose starting to play as an adult, for the notes being folk tunes are easily found.*

*He can learn ornamentation from the shepherd or how to put the kick into a reel from the ferryman and he tests his progress by the reaction of his friends round the fireside. If their tapping feet falter he has lost his rhythm. He will develop his own style, good or bad, and whether it is good or bad will not matter if, ultimately, he masters the right rhythm full of the fire that prompts hoochs and yells from dancers. He plays in the limited space of his house and, as the merest touch of the bow produces sufficient sound for him to hear, he bothers no more about volume.*



## 12

*At last Lady Huntly proposed musick, and on the fine, grand pianoforte being opened she sat down to it herself and let us hear some Swills airs she had picked up on her travels. The first chord was sufficient, the touch was masterly. In every style she played well, but her Scotch musick, tender or lively, was perfection. Sir Walter Scott immortalised this delightful talent of hers in his Halidon Hill, and she fully merited his highest praise. I have never heard her surpassed not even equalled, as I don't reckon all that wonderful finger work now in fashion [1850] was worth listening to. Her lord, who was very sensible of the power of harmony, was always pleased with her musick, listening to it with evident pleasure and extreme pride, particularly when she gave him the reels and strathspeys he danced so well, when he would jump up gaily and crack his fingers like a pair of castagnets and as did everyone hear better playing than that. Then if she went on to the marches and quick steps of the Highland regiments, which she certainly did give in the most inspiring manner, he would get quite excited and declare no bard could equal her.*



## 13

No effeminate customs our sinews unbrace,  
 No luxurious tables enervate our race;  
 Our loud sounding pipe breathes the true martial strain  
 And our hearts still the old Scottish valour retain

Such our love of liberty, our country and our laws,  
 That like our ancestors of old, we stand by freedom's cause,  
 We'll bravely fight like heroes bright for honour and applause  
 And defy the French with all their arts to alter our laws.

In the garb of old Gaul with the fire of old Rome,  
 From the heath cover'd mountains of Scotia we come,  
 Where the Romans endeavour'd our country to gain,  
 But our ancestors fought, and they fought not in vain.



14

*Chae cried 'Strip the Willow', and they all lined up, and the melodeon played bonnily in Chae's hands, and Long Rob's fiddle-bow was darting and glimmering, and in two minutes in the whirl and go of strip-the-willow, there wasn't a cold soul in Blawerie barn, or a cold sole either.*





## 15

*When you're going into the Salvation Army college one of the things on your list was a concertina... and at that time, in the 1940s a concertina was really essential, and I got learning on it at the college. But it was really, it was great because you could sing a solo, playing chords. I bought it in Kirkcaldy. In fact, very few of us did not have a concertina. It was the done thing. I had a friend in Dunfermline that was at the college with me, and she had one as well, 'mean we all had them. And they sort of trained us and if you couldn't play, eh, maybe the whole thing you could play chords which was enough to keep you on the tune for playing outside so that in these far-off days it really was a great asset. Well, they gave us, we had big charts with the layout of the concertina and where all the eh, chords were, that sort of thing... It used to make some noise I can tell you. We were put right down the bottom floor of the college... They would get us all playing the different chords.*



16

*Fifty years ago [1870] it was thought very improper for a girl to play the violin. Some of the old ladies used to be quite horror-stricken at the idea of “a lassie playin’ the fiddle.”*

*Nowadays, no one thinks it the least strange to see a girl playing a violin. The old people who had objections are all dead, and we have a new generation. If any of those old folks were asked to explain their objections, they could only say something about “unsexing yourselves,” or “Women will ne’er be content till they wear the breeks.”*

*There are now plenty of lady violinists, both professional and amateur. Some of our orchestral societies have a large number of lady members, and when a concert is given the platform is quite brightened by their presence.*

## References

Eydmann, Stuart 'GOLDEN AGE I' in *Cenchrastus: Scottish and International Literature, Arts and Affairs*, 1985, vol.21, (Edinburgh) p. 51.

Eydmann, Stuart 'Diversity and Diversification in Scottish Music' in John Beech et. al. eds. *Scottish Life and Society: A Compendium of Scottish Ethnology. (Volume 10, Oral Literature and Performance Culture)*. (Edinburgh, 2007) pp. 193-212.

Johnson, David *Scottish Fiddle Music in the Eighteenth Century*. (Edinburgh, 1984) pp. 245-246.

## Photographs and Texts

(All photographs within this article are copyright of the author and should not be replicated without consent).

1 Unidentified violinist, Haddington, East Lothian.: Skinner, James Scott *A Guide to Bowing*. 1900, modern reprint, (Edinburgh, 1984) p. 25.

2 Unidentified player of reel pipes.: Donaldson, William *Pipers. A Guide to the players and music of the Highland pipe*. (Edinburgh, 2005) pp. 67-68.

3 Unidentified accordionist and friend.: McIntosh, Peter *History of Kintyre*. (Campbeltown, 1929) p. 39.

4 Unidentified violinist.: Johnson, David *Scottish Fiddle Music in the Eighteenth Century*. (Edinburgh, 1984) pp. 245-246.

5 Dancers accompanied by a solo fiddler.: Flett, J.P and Flett, T.M *Traditional Dancing in Scotland*. (London 1964, 1985 edition). p. 48.

6 Unidentified boys playing melodeons.: Campbell and Co., *Glasgow Privilege Price List*. (Glasgow, 1890) p. 4.

7 Unidentified concertina player and friend, Belfast.: Smith, Vic 'Len Graham' in *Musical Traditions*. Article MT294 (interview 31 October 2013), published online at:

[http://mustrad.org.uk/articles/l\\_graham.htm](http://mustrad.org.uk/articles/l_graham.htm)

8 Unidentified miner with melodeon, West Lothian.: Durland, Kellogg *Among the Fife Miners*. (London, 1904) p. 123.

9 Unidentified violinist, Tain.: Volti, Carl *Reminiscences and Verses*. (Glasgow, 1909) p. 44.

10 Unidentified violinist, Dundee.: HMSO *Primary Education. A Report of the Advisory Council on Education in Scotland*. (Edinburgh, 1946) p. 77.

11 Unidentified fiddler, Aberdeenshire.: Cora Cuthbert 'Violins and Fiddles' in *Saltire Review*. Vol. 5, no. 17, Winter 1958. (Edinburgh) p. 48-49.

12 Unidentified pianist and violinist, probably England.: Grant, Elizabeth *Memoirs of a Highland Lady: the autobiography of Elizabeth Grant of Rothiemurchus*. Vol. 1, (London, 1911) p. 334.

13 Unidentified pipers.: *In the Garb of Old Gaul*, song with words attributed to Sir Harry Erskine (1710 -1765). Set to music by General John Reid, who was a senior officer of the 42nd Regiment of Foot (The Black Watch) during the Seven Years' War and was founder of the Chair of Music at the University of Edinburgh.

14 Unidentified melodeon and fiddle players, probably England.: Gibbon, Lewis Grassie *Sunset Song*. (London, 1933, 1970 edition) p. 156.

15 Unidentified Salvation Army concertina player.: Mary Sampson, Rosyth. From an interview by Stuart Eydmann, 1988. Archive tape reference: Eydmann 88.01.A16.

16 Unknown violinist, probably England.: Volti, Carl *Reminiscences and Verses*. (Glasgow, 1909) p. 43.