FOLK SONG AND SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

A STUDY OF THE REPERTOIRE OF NAN MACKINNON OF VATERSAY

James Ross*

Folklore collectors of all generations have been accustomed to regard themselves as rather late in entering the field and have tended to view what they collected as remnants of much more elaborate traditions. While the passage of time has proved such evaluations wrong more than once, that should not blind us to the fundamental changes which have taken place in the culture of the bearers of oral tradition, and that this century will undoubtedly see the end of oral transmission as an important element in the literary or musical heritage of a community. This assumption may seem strange in view of the fact that it is still possible, on the fringes of Gaelic Scotland, to hear the ballads of Ossian or the story of Cuchullain guarding the great bull of Cuailgne. Even in such communities, however, it is quite obvious that real transmission has ceased—that the singer and story-teller of tradition no longer have a specific function to perform in society. They are no longer called upon to perform, except to the collector with his acquired respect for oral antiquities. The audience of avid young listeners, which alone can perpetuate a tradition, is absent.

While we can judge from the cessation of transmission that the death of a great tradition is near, the end does not seem to be in the nature of a gradual decline. Beyond the middle of the twentieth century, it has been possible to record story-tellers who have provided texts as good as could be hoped for at any point in their history. A singer has emerged also, whose repertoire of over four hundred and fifty songs, delivered entirely from memory without the assistance of any form of script, reveals gifts which would be adjudged great at any stage in the development of the society.

Nan Eachainn Fhionnlaigh, as Nan MacKinnon is known in her own society, was born on the island of Barra in 1903.

* Carnegie Research Fellow, Edinburgh.

Her father Eachann Fhionnlaigh, was a native of Barra, and her mother, the source of almost her entire repertoire, had left her native Mingulay after her marriage, to settle in Barra. In 1910, after the crofter-fishermen of Mingulay and Barra had 'raided' the more sheltered and fertile island of Vatersay, Nan's parents crossed to that island also and staked their claim. Apart from a year or two on the mainland in service or in the herring industry, Nan has spent all her life since that time on Vatersay, and since the age of twenty-two she has been permanently settled there. Her return coincided with an intense increase of interest in her own tradition, and the beginning of the absorption of her mother's vast unwritten literature dates from this period.

The purpose of this paper, generally speaking, is to report on a major fieldwork project which has culminated in the recording from this singer of what is possibly the greatest individual repertoire ever to be collected. This traditional repertoire will be published in its entirety in the near future, and it will be done in such a way as to illuminate as far as possible the peculiar social environment in which it came into being. Gaelic songs did not exist simply for popular entertainment. While the gatherings in the popular *ceilidh* houses of the townships were undoubtedly important to the transmission of all kinds of folk traditions, this should not obscure the fact that songs were very closely integrated into the life of the community and were not reserved purely for leisure moments. A large number of songs were connected with communal activity of an occupational or ritualistic kind. Commenting on the widespread use of songs in physical employment, Johnson said "They accompany in the Highlands every action which can be done in equal time with an appropriated strain . . ." (Journey, 56). The great contribution of the communal cloth-waulking alone to a rich song tradition must not be understressed. The chants recited by young people while circuiting and entering a house on New Year's Eve and the charms and incantations which were used for the curing of illness are perhaps the best-known of the songs which we can say had a function of a ritualistic kind. Songs or mouth music tunes in this repertoire which are suggestive of other lesser known practices are *Tog air each i* (1177.4) sung in connection with a special kind of horse race, and *Faoda sibh éirigh* (581B1), the tune reserved for wakening a newly married couple. In short, the principle on which the preparation of the repertoire for publication is proceeding, is

that the songs of an individual or of a community cannot be considered in isolation from a multitude of environmental factors.

After the technical labour of transcription and translation has been completed, one is faced with the fundamental task of ordering the songs in groups, the members of which show some common characteristics of theme, function or structure. For the simple purpose of arriving at a satisfactory lay-out for publication, it has been decided to present the songs mainly in terms of one aspect of them, namely, their theme. The Cradle Song group is an exception to this general rule. Cradle Songs are, properly speaking, identified by their function, since their texts do not always indicate that they have been used in this way. It is interesting to trace in them, however, a marked continuity of theme in that those of them that have developed texts are usually laments for husband or lover, killed violently. Some of them also have supernatural associations in that they are sung in the context of a story with a fairy-lover theme, on account of an illicit liason between a human being and a fairy.

The *Puirt a Beul*, or Mouth Music Songs, are a special case. It is not easy to identify satisfactorily a song as a *port a beul* since there is no trustworthy criterion for distinguishing them. The Gaelic name *port* gives a good indication of their origin. The words "melody" or "tune" do not translate *port* adequately. It means properly a melody played on an instrument and the word would never be applied to the melody of a song. *Port a beul*, therefore, can only be adequately translated "instrumental tune from mouth". This suggests the instrumental origin of the genre although the popular use of the term today would include many songs that did not necessarily share this origin. We can take it, though, that their *raison d'etre* is melody and not a textual development of a theme. They are characterised by a verbal repetitiveness which is not normally found in other songs and in a number of cases their vocal content is meaningless. Many of them simply present a visual image of a ludicrous kind with no element of narrative: "The miller fell from the scaffolding and leapt among the plates" (1289B7). References to the dance occur frequently but always with the exaggeration of humour:

Dòmhall agus fidheall aige
Raghall agus pìob aige
's g' eil am boc is feadan aige
'g iarraidh dhol dha ruighle.[1] (1289B10)

Donald with a fiddle
Ronald with a pipe
and the billy goat with his chanter
wants to join the reel.

The actual description of any part of a dance is rare and the individual peculiarities of the participants seem to have been of more interest to the composer. The account of the manner in which Hugh Chisholm danced is interesting but we do not know whether it is meant to be an actual description:

Cóignear na dhéidh cóignear reimhe
agus cóignear air gach taobh dheth. (1171.6)

Five behind him, five in front of him
and five on each side.

These are themes in embryo; the repetition of an actual statement is almost always substituted for its further development. References to courtship occur also, sometimes in connection with the actual partnership of the dance and at other times with no dance association:

Rì a rù a nighean donn
robh thu (raoir) an cùl a ghàraidh (1158-5)

Ri a ru brown girl
were you last night behind the dyke.

Phrases such as this, repeated with minor verbal changes, and with the support of phrases of syllables, can form the verbal content of a *port a beul.*

Occasionally the texts are more detailed and in these cases the humorous and satirical tendencies are continued. A woman composes a *port* to an article of her underwear which has disappeared from a clothes line (1289B8). The subject of another is an unusually clad stranger who has visited the island (1289B7). The satirical tendency of the *port a beul* is exemplified by *Tha biodag aig Mac Thómais.*[2] This widely distributed little song suggests that the wearing of a dirk in public places implied some social rank, and that the subject Mac Thómais was not entitled to it (1189.7). The singer tells of a piper who played the melody in the presence of the subject and who paid for his temerity with his life. We get an interesting sidelight on the traditional significance of satire from her further information

that when Mac Thómais was brought to court for his crime he was not convicted because he was being satirised at the time.

It is not easy to gauge the extent to which the eighty or so *puirt a beul* in this collection had a specific function in that they were used to accompany dancing. This type of song is found throughout the Gaelic speaking area although today there is little trace of such a function. The singer believes that they were used for this purpose, one tune in particular *Feumaidh mi mo ghùn a dheanamh* being sung with the "Scotch Reel". We could assume, perhaps, that *puirt a beul* came into existence for the purpose of accompanying dances but as a song genre have outgrown and outlived their original function.

The most prominent theme in the whole repertoire is love. The large number of women's love songs is unusual and is undoubtedly due in part to the great extent to which songs were used in occupations which were almost exclusively the concern of women. There is a fundamental difference of a structural kind between women's love songs and love songs composed by men. The latter are usually in a quatrain stanza followed by a refrain which is also usually of four phrases, or on the other hand in an eight-lined stanza without any refrain at all. In the former, quatrain stanzas, except in late songs, are few, and the sung verse is frequently a single line followed by a syllabic refrain of varying degrees of complexity. The predominance of purely syllabic refrains in the women's songs and the great extent to which these refrains encroach upon the text seem to indicate communal performance, or even extempore composition in a responsive group.[3] The environment in which they acquired their peculiar structure and in which many of them probably came into existence was undoubtedly that of the communal cloth fulling or waulking, an industry which was traditionally the women's task. While this use of the songs does not account satisfactorily for the purely syllabic nature of the refrains, it does account for the varying relationship between chorus and text. The variety of refrains can be seen from one aspect as representing a scale of increasing vocal participation by the group, in many cases actually breaking into and altering the structure of the stanza.

The love songs of the waulking tradition are almost all early. They are difficult to date precisely and we can only say that they reflect the peculiar social circumstances of the era of the clan system before the social dichotomy of peasant and

landlord was established in the mid-eighteenth century. They are, on the whole, somewhat less subjective than the songs of the later period. There is a tendency to stress the qualities and graces of the young hero and the marked fondness for pedigree present in them is not as characteristic of the later songs. Indeed the aim of some of them might have been to praise the leader in terms of the ideals traditionally valued by the clan, thus following the encomiastic poets. In informal eulogies composed by women, love imagery could be expected and it is impossible to separate the love song from the eulogy with any certainty. In the song *Chunna mise mo leannan*[4] the singer moves from a statement that her lover has spurned her to a eulogy of the armed company of his clan of which he is a member:

Luchd nan calpannan troma
chùil donna cheum eutrom

Luchd nan claidhntean geur geala
chìte faileas na ghréin dhiubh (1163.2)

Stout-calved company
of brown hair and light step

. . . of sharp, white swords
reflecting the sun's light

Apart from the eulogistic phases in the flyting songs there is no proper sub-literary counterpart in this repertoire to the encomiastic eulogy to the patron so common in Celtic poetry. Despite the differences in form, however, there is a remarkable unity of values which suggests that the typically heroic ideals of the official poetry were not simply a prerogative of a ruling warrior class. In the impressive directness of the women's love songs from the early period we see clearly their popular conception of the hero. Finery in dress is frequently mentioned, as is his capacity to bear arms:

Dhut a thig na h-airm an òrdugh
gunna piostail bogha 's dòrlach
siunnsar caol 'sa thaobh air òradh . . . (1161.1)

The array of weapons well becomes you
gun, pistol, bow and quiver
slender whinger with gilt sides . . .[5]

We find the subject in various roles, as hunter, horseman, mariner, or simply as the arrayed and adorned stripling endowed at once with virile and with moral qualities. Sexual abstinence is praised:

Gruaidh dhearg ro cheathach 's ro uisge
ruigeadh tu 'm ball am biodh mise
leiginn sìnte sios ri 'm shlios thu
gad a leigeadh cha bu mhisde . . . (1081.1)

Red cheek through wind and rain
you would reach the place where I would be
I would let you lie by my side
and I would be none the worse for it . . .

On the other hand sexual prowess is also praised and the subject of one song is addressed as *Lùb ùr leis a lùb gach caile*, "vigorous youth to whom each girl submits". The obeisance to the hero is such that even the girl fallen in pregnancy does not complain if her seducer is no common lad but *sgoilear donn na Beurla*, "brown-haired scholar of English". The respect for learning implicit in this and in such lines as *leughadair an duilleig shoilleir* "reader of the bright page" is not rare in the tradition. Pedigree also receives the emphasis familiar in bardic poetry and in one song we find genealogical references to clans renowned for their resistance to established authority:

Gura car thu Mhac Dhùghaill
o thùr nan clach snaidhte

Gura car thu Mhac Dhòmhaill
a ròigheala bratach

'S gura car thu dh' Iarl Ìle
bhuinigeadh cìs as na bataill (1167.1)

You are kin to MacDougal
from the smooth-stoned tower

You are kin to MacDonald
of royal war banners

You are kin to the Earl of Islay
winner of tribute from battles

While these songs do not show the sustained and deliberate inflation of the subject's prowess that characterises all Gaelic

poetry of the era of patronage, whether bardic or post-bardic, they do show this remarkable similarity in values. Undoubtedly their frequent performance would tend to perpetuate ideals of a purely heroic kind and in this they would have a similar effect to the encomiastic poetry, always rejecting innovation and change and protecting the traditional social structure even where it came into conflict with established authority. The work of the Irish bards seemed evil to the Elizabethans seeking to extirpate the Gaelic civilisation of Ireland, and Spenser's strictures on those 'which are to them instead of poets'[6] would have been echoed by the Scots Parliament in their own desire to break the closed native society of the clan system. In successive pieces of legislation in the seventeenth century, the Scots Parliament sought to change conditions which the singers perpetuated by eulogy. They were combating deeply rooted values and moral principles which were very different from their own. The legislation limiting the importation of wine to the Highlands is very revealing in this respect. There had been much concern, and probably rightly, at the capacity of the chiefs for mammoth bouts of drinking and feast-giving, at which, it was maintained, much of the internecine strife originated. In the songs, addiction to drink is a virtue and Montrose's lieutenant, Alasdair MacDonald, is described eulogistically as *pòiteir* and *drongair*, words which we can only translate adequately today as "drunkard" or "sot". It is the communal binge, however, that is mentioned more frequently—feast-giving in which both the capacity to drink and the means to provide it are extolled:

> 'S e m' eudail mhór Mac ic Ailein
> pòiteir an fhion air gach cala
> ceannachadair fial nan galan
> mar dh' òladh càch phàigheadh Ailean. (1162.1)
>
> My great treasure is Clanranald
> drinker of wine in each harbour;
> generous buyer of gallons
> as others drink Alan pays . . .

In the woman's adulation of the lover one sees a conscious choice of attributes that are not simply those of the ideal provider or protector. Any capacity in the subject for agricultural industry is never mentioned, nor is fishing except when the prey is trout or salmon. We must not regard the phrase *creachadair nan sgeireag* "pillager of reefs" as implying anything

but the capacity to kill seals, or possibly the cormorant, while any reference to the eating of shellfish or seafish can actually be a term of abuse. Indeed, one might feel that the term "folk-song" is not entirely appropriate where such clearly defined restrictions of a class kind are found.

It is revealing, however, that these restrictions on personal attributes are not found throughout the repertoire. In their open acceptance of the struggle for survival, the later songs are perhaps more typically folksongs. In the fine version of the *Eriskay Love Lilt* (1158.3) we find sentiments which are unthinkable in the earlier songs, the lover saying "from the hard gravel I would take food for my love". The change is basically a social one, a fundamental re-orientation of attitudes within the community and not a question of a depressed class becoming belatedly vocal.

The total number of songs bearing on the relationship between the two sexes is very great. Over and above the 'straight' love songs there are songs by women complaining of seduction or rape and subsequent pregnancy. While there are elements of complaint in many of the love songs, usually involving unrequited love and subsequent desertion, the true complaints are principally concerned with the airing of a grievance. These include songs by women married to old men, complaints by women about slanderous accusations and about other women stealing their lovers, and a man's song complaining of a too youthful marriage.

The young wife complaining of the aged husband is a perennial theme in international folksong. In one song *Och a smeòrach nan craobh* the young wife addresses a thrush with her complaint of her husband's senility. As is usual in Gaelic songs of this type the failings of the old that are emphasised are their alleged desires for physical comfort and a full belly. This little song succinctly emphasises these closely canalised desires of the old husband and contrasts them with his sexual incapacity:

Nuair a theid mi chrò nan caorach
"aodach" as a seann duine

Nuair a theid mi chrò nan gobhar
"cobhar" as a seann duine

Nuair a thionndaidhs mi 'sa leabaidh
"och och" as a seann duine (1169.7)

When I go to the sheepfold
"clothing" says the old man

When I go to the goat pen
"cream" says the old man

And when I turn in bed
"alas" says the old man.

Pregnancy while unmarried was not always a cause for unremitting complaint and in one song it is possible for a man to reply to his former sweetheart who has been complaining about him:

. . . tha thu 'n còmhnuidh ga luaidh rium
gad a bhiodh tu bhuam torrach
b'e siod solair a b' uaisle . . . (1074.4)

. . . you often say
that a pregnancy from me
would be the noblest luxury

There are, however, a number of "rising belt" songs complaining of seduction and subsequent pregnancy without the background of a love affair:

Dh' fhiadhaich a maraich air bòrd mi
's rinn a ròġaire mo ghlacadh

Dh' fhiadhaich a sgiobair gu rùm mi
is shil mo shùilean gu frasach

'S nuair a thig mi far mo bhòidse
theid a maraich òg a bhaisteadh. (1086.1)

The sailor invited me on board
and the rogue seized me.

The captain invited me to his room
and my eyes showered tears.

And when I come from my voyage
the young mariner will be baptized.

Despite the rigorous discipline of the "sessionings" applied to both male and female, the songs testify to the frequency of transgression. One cannot help a slight feeling of sympathy for

the anonymous author of the "breach of promise" song. Undoubtedly having in mind the numerous deceptions and desertions of the day, the singer feels that he has a genuine grievance:

Chaidh mo dhìteadh air son gruagaich
chionn 's gun gheall mi uair a pòsadh.

Chaidh mo dhìteadh moch is feasgar
chionn's gun tug mi greis air gòraich. (1160.4)

I have been condemned for a girl
because I once promised to marry her.

I have been condemned morning and evening
because I sported for a while.

Also unique in the repertoire is the song of the man shackled in the "boot". His only crime, he claims, is lying with his own married wife. He made her pregnant while she was giving breast to the chief's child, thus presumably breaking some kind of fosterage contract. Indeed the only song among those which are principally concerned with expressing a deeply felt grievance which does not have an inter-sexual aspect is *Hi dhiurabh ó chan eil mi slàn.* This seems to be a complaint by a widow that Dómhnall Gorm, a chief of the MacDonalds of Sleat, has taken away all her sons for military service.

The economic aspect of marriage shows itself frequently in the songs of both men and women. Men stress the importance of personal qualities and their preferment of such to the fold of cattle:

Gum b' annsa banntrach Ghearrsabhaig
gun earradh ach a léine. (1169.5)

I would take the widow of Gearrsabhaig
with no wealth but her shirt.

In the women's love songs in the same mood we get *gheall thu mo phùsadh gun cheannach* "you promised to marry me without being bought" and:

'S aithne dhomh fhìn na chum bhuam thu
tainead mo chruidh laoigh air buailidh. (1177.3)

Well I know what kept you from me
the scarcity of my milk cattle in fold.

That the young woman felt keenly the strength of the economic pressures of marriage is obvious from a number of references. Parents and brothers often combined to persuade or bribe the girl to forsake her lover to take the man with the cattle whoever he might be:

Gheall mo mhathair fàinn òir dhomh
gheall m' athair buaile bhó dhomh
gad gheobhainn sin agus saoghal mór dheth
's mór gum b'annsa leam gaol an òigeir. (1289B14)

My mother promised me a golden ring
My father a fold of cattle
though I should get these with long life
I would choose the love of the youth.

The situation gave rise to a genre of composition purporting to give a conversation between a young woman and an aging suitor. In one early song the suitor presses his case eloquently enough but is met with a final speech in which he is completely dismissed:

's a bhodaich léith fuirich thall
's cur do chuid cruidh laoigh ri gleann
's cur do chaoraich bhàn a fang
's faigh bean eile theid nan ceann.

Nar mheala mi mi mo choileir[7]
m' usgraichean na bhràiste bhrollaich
mar eil mo chion aìr a sgoileir
leughadair nan duilleag soilleir. (1075.3)

Grey carle stay away
send your milk cattle to the pastures
put your white sheep in the fold
and find another woman to tend them.

May I never enjoy my collar
my jewels or my breast brooch
if I do not love the scholar
reader of the bright pages.

On the other hand, the young men sought or were persuaded to seek the woman with the substantial dowry, or perhaps a widow of no great youth but with the all important cattle. Inevitably there were regrets and the women were not

alone in bewailing the incapacities of an aging spouse. After his marriage to a cattle owner the refrain of one man's song goes:

Mar bhiodh an crodh cha ghabhainn thu
mar bhiodh an crodh cha b' fhiù thu
mar bhiodh an crodh 's na laoigh 'nan cois
cha laighinn-s' orra chùlu (1102.1)

Were it not for the cattle I would not take you
were it not for the cattle I would not care
were it not for the cattle with calves at foot
I would not lie behind you.

In such limited space it is not possible to give detailed comment on the numerous love songs in the collection. The imagery is very varied on the whole although certain features of composition tend to be repeated. The girl is usually praised in terms of her skills, her appearance, and her moral qualities. The respectable occupations for young women in the early songs seem to have been needlework and reading. Also in a society in which songs were involved to a great extent in the life of the people we can expect the frequent use of the image of the girl singing. The colour and form of the hair is mentioned as often in the men's songs as in the women's, but only in the latter do we find praise of shapely legs. The men are fond of stressing what they would do for their sweethearts:

Mharbhainn iasg air an t-sàile
fiadh air bhàrr nam beann fuara
coileach dubh air bharr géigeadh
's chan fhaicinn éis air mo ghruagaich. (1102.1)

I would kill fish on the sea
deer on the peaks of the cold hills
blackcock on branch tip
my love would not be in need.

They in their turn stress the sacrifices they would make to be with their chosen one, the distances they would travel and the conditions that they would be prepared to endure:

'S mi gu siùbhladh leat a fireach
fo shileadh na fuar-bheann. (1174.2)

. . . with you I would travel the moors
under the rain of cold mountains.

A compositional technique found throughout Gaelic song is that of antithesis—the deliberate framing of contrasts to dramatise a situation.[8] Lines expressing negative statements lead on to a positive affirmation. While the technique is more usually found in laments it is also used in certain love songs, particularly those which complain of unrequited love and desertion. A girl addressing *Fhir a chinn duibh 's a mhuineil ghil* "Man of black hair and white chest" goes on to say:

'S òg a cheangail mi mo ghruag dhut
chan ann le stìom ghuirm na uaine
le deòir mo chinn ruith le m' ghruaidhean. (1177.3)

Young I was when I bound my hair for you
not with a band either blue or green
but with my head's tears running down my cheeks.

The unnaturalness of the state of separation is sometimes stressed by references to relationships among birds or animals. In a dialogue between a man and his former sweetheart who has married while he has been away on a long voyage, she speaks of the coming of the cuckoo in summer and of the mating of the birds in the fields:

. . . seinn ciùil air na beannan
's air bharru nan geugan
's ann bhios mise 's mo leannan
a dol a faidead o chéile. (1163.1)

. . . sounding music on the hills
and on the branch tips
while my lover and I
move further from each other.

And again in a song complaining of seduction, the girl sees the stag and the hind together and says:

Righ gur buidhe dhaibh péin sin
ach chan ionnan 's mar dh' éirich
dhomhsa 's Dhomhall mac Sheumais . . . (1182.3)

God it is their joy
but that is not how it befell me
with Donald son of James.

In view of the great number of songs with themes of an inter-sexual kind, it is surprising to find only one song of the

international *Pastourelle* type (RL 580B8). In this respect the repertoire is typical of Scottish Gaelic tradition as a whole and it is one of a few ways in which it differs fundamentally from Irish tradition.[9] Also, in the case of the Night Visit theme, allusions to the practice are commoner than the songs themselves. There is a version of a sung invitation by a married woman to her lover to enter the house. She says her husband is hunting in the deer forest and that her father is asleep with the blanket about his head. The isolation of young women in the shielings undoubtedly gave good opportunities for night visit activities and a number of references to courting have a sheiling background:

Ann am bothag a bharraich
leabaidh thana dhìth luachrach

Ann am bothag an t-sùgraidh
's e bu dùnadh dhi sguabag. (1173.4)

In the grass-thatched bothy
in the scanty bed of few rushes

In the bothy of love-making
closed only by a sheaf.

In discussing the women's love songs of the earlier period from their eulogistic aspect, we have been considering a sphere in which the theme of the oral and anonymous singer coincides with that of the bard, or "official" poet, showing a certain continuity of values.[10] While it is not the purpose of this paper, or indeed of the fuller editing of the repertoire, to compare the two traditions in any elaborate way, it is illuminating to look briefly at another aspect in which the themes coincide. The formal elegy is a well known literary type in Gaelic poetry and some orthodox pieces of this kind occur in the repertoire, composed on the death of members of the MacNeil clan and others. The place of the elegy, however, has been largely taken by the lament, which is quite different in purpose from the elegy.[11] The composition of a formal elegy when required was an important part of the function of the patronised poet and in the fulfilment of it he was undoubtedly harnessed by a diction shaped by centuries of bardic usage. It is difficult to get an image of the subject, any clear impression of character or personality or of the

nature of the bond between him and the poet. The good and the bad chief alike received their death songs, and the formal function of the elegiac poet is emphasised well by Mary MacLeod's poem on the death of the unpopular chief, Roderick MacLeod of Dunvegan:

> O root of heroes
> whelp of lions
> and grandson of two grandsires
> of most roisterous entertainment
> where was to be found on this side of Europe
> your equal in your way of life.[12]

In not being the fulfilment of a strictly defined function the lament is more spontaneous and genuine. It is not concerned with the elevation of the dead person; there is no preoccupation with his achievements in life or with any real or imagined influence he may have had on the society in which he lived. The references to material wealth and to social status so common in the elegiac poetry are absent from the lament, or they might occur, as in the lament for Seathan, in an oblique way and only to stress more emphatically the difference between life and death:

> Tha Seathan a steòmbar uachdrach
> gun òl cupa gun òl cuaicheadh
> gun òl fion far mhiosan uasal . . . (1082.1)
>
> Seathan is tonight in the upper chamber
> with no cup drinking, no bowl drinking
> with no wine drinking from noble dishes . . .

The lament always emphasises personal loss. We do not find in it the pre-occupation with "status" imagery which characterises the official panegyric and which leaves little room for emotional expression. In this way the orthodox *marbhrann* or "death-song" is very different from a lament such as that of the woman who loved the son of the Earl of Cluny:

> Mo chruit chiùil thu mo cheòl fìdhle
> mo chlàrsaichean nan teud binn thu
> mo bhuaile mhór na chrodh laoigh thu . . .
>
> Gura mise th' air mo chuaradh
> ma 's e 'n fhairge ghlas thug bhuam thu
> rocach na ròn an déidh do shuaineadh.

You were my crowd of music, my music of fiddles
my harps of melodious strings
my great fold of milk cattle . . .

Mine is the torment
if the grey sea has taken you
if seals' weeds twine you.

The lament in the early tradition is almost always a woman's song. Only rarely is it possible to identify the subject or to date the songs with any reasonable precision. Indeed it is highly unlikely that many of them ever were detailed texts embodying circumstances of time and place. They were more probably lyrics composed within the community in which the tragedy occurred and to which the details were already known. The circumstances that are mentioned in them were undoubtedly not rare in such a society, the harvest of *sgeinean fuara* "cold knives" and *blàr na ruaigeadh* "battle rout", the sudden engulfing of a boat at sea, or simply youth struck in its prime by disease. They rarely give us information of a particular kind which could provide us with evidence for identifying the subject. The typical lament is a woman's song bewailing the death of the man or men nearest to her:

Mo thigh mór an déidh a rùsgadh
's mo sheòmbar an déidh a spùilleadh
mo thriuir bhràithrean marbh 's a chùl-tigh
's fuil an cuim ro léine drùdhadh . . . (1075.2)

My great house roofless
my chamber pillaged
and my three brothers dead in the outhouse
their chests' blood seeping through their shirts.

The songs of the past two hundred years reflect some of the changing social conditions during that important period in Highland history. Those who enlisted in the newly formed Highland regiments made their own contribution to the song tradition, as did also those who joined the crews of the ocean going sailing vessels. In the later period problems of enclosure and land agitation appear. The herring industry was also important, not only in providing its own themes but in encouraging the dissemination of songs by providing an arena in which people from different Gaelic-speaking areas could associate for lengthy periods of time.

A minor but interesting group of songs reflects the attitude of a section of the community to the popular consumption of tea. There was much controversy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Scotland about the possible evil effects of the increasing use of tea. It was undoubtedly most expensive to buy and a luxury that only the rich could properly afford, but this was not the only argument used by those who condemned it. Sir John Sinclair in his *Analysis of the Statistical Account* claims that coarse black tea drunk hot could destroy the nervous system. Until the middle of the nineteenth century there were many people in public life, chiefly ministers and doctors, who claimed that the injudicious use of the drug could cause fainting fits and nervous disorders.

We find interesting references to these supposed debilitating effects of tea-drinking in verses about the choice of wives. A verse by a man in dispraise of Lowland women includes the lines:

> . . . gum b' annsa te bhòdhach
> a léine 's a còta
> na sgleòdag na mórchuis
> nachòladh ach tì. (1288 A9)
>
> I would choose the good looking one
> in shirt and coat
> before the haughty slut
> who only drinks tea.

A song addressed to a man who is about to choose a wife warns him about the kind of woman to avoid:

> Chan éirich i tràth
> cha tig e ri càil
> cadal fada 's e 's fheàrr le beudaig
> a phoit tì a bhi làn
> 's na h-aoibhlean fo màs
> 's i tarraing a bhlàiths mar dh' fheumadh. (1288A7)
>
> She will not rise early
> she does not take to it
> long sleep is the little gossip's choice
> the teapot to be full
> with the embers under it
> taking the warmth as it needs it.

While there is no praise of tea there is no dispraise of tobacco or snuff. We can imagine that in isolated areas supplies

would not always be readily available and that during the frequent periods of dearth the stranger would be readily solicited. The popular estimation of his character would probably depend on the willingness with which he shared his supply. It is significant that the strongest tradition which survives in the island about one of the famous collectors of the nineteenth century is that he was rather mean with his tobacco. The establishment of a craving which could only be periodically satisfied gave rise to songs and the refrain of one hopes for the arrival of "the man of great heart":

O phiob thombaca cur a mach do cheò
feuch a faic thu tighinn fear a chridhe mhóir
O phiob thombaca cur a mach do cheò.

Tombac' agus snaoisein
cha tig sinn as aonais
b' fhearr leam e na 'n t-aodach
nuair bu daoire chlòimh (1173.5)

O tobacco pipe send out your smoke
look to see if he comes—the man of great heart
O tobacco pipe send out your smoke.

Tobacco and snuff
we cannot do without it
I would prefer it to cloth
of the dearest wool.

Dearths of other kinds occurred too and there is the little song by a husband warning his wife not to give big bannocks to the guests (1176.5). Songs or tunes purporting to carry messages are not uncommon and in this case the singer pretends to be lulling a child as he advises his wife, in the presence of the guests, not to be too generous with the bread. The potato did much to alleviate the labour of grain growing in an unsuitable climate, and while it did nothing to raise the standard of living, it at least kept hunger at bay and allowed an increase in population. One song cursing hunger, blesses the potato as the chief means of repelling it (1288B4). It is a well known fact, however, that the non-immune potato was an unstable foundation for a population on the increase and people still speak of *a bhliadhna loth am buntàta* "the year the potato rotted" as the end of an epoch. An interesting song

from the time of the potato famine defies the captain of a relief ship which came to Barra, and who would only give provisions to those who would change to the Protestant faith (1288A12).

This period marked the peak of the population rise in many areas of the Highlands. The decline which began then has continued since. These migrations have coloured recent Gaelic song to a great extent. Even today when the average local poet is in light mood he composes humorously or libellously about local incidents, but if he feels that he must be serious he sings nostalgically about his homeland. The theme is also popular with more literate song writers who compose for a wider community than a township or parish. At the present day it is possible to listen to a public concert or to a broadcast of Gaelic songs and find that out of every three songs sung, two are concerned directly with the theme of homeland. In view of their great popularity in recent times, it is interesting to find that the number of homeland songs in this repertoire is very small.

The homeland theme undoubtedly took wide root as a result of a legitimate enough pre-occupation with social change. The sudden emergence of a materially underdeveloped community in the middle of the eighteenth century resulted in hardship and bewilderment. A social system based largely on personal attendance to the chief and easily mobilised manpower, did not have the resilience to face the economic penetration which followed the peace. A land too impoverished to bear it was encumbered with an increasing population, and from the bitterness of the inevitable migrations came a burst of song composition lamenting the disappearance of the crowded townships before the advance of *na caoraich mhóra* "the big sheep".

From a genre of song composition which originated in the actual vicissitudes of a community, the homeland theme developed into an obsession in which any wider poetic impulse tends to be submerged. Before the end of the Victorian period, when security of tenure for the crofter had already been established, the development of the theme had moved away from any reality of circumstance and had become a predilection for the essentially unreal—a lament for an idyllic life in the past that had never existed.

Neither the social upheaval of the migrations nor the quasi-literary song type it gave rise to are reflected to any great

extent in this repertoire. This may be due to the isolation of the community in which it came into being. Whereas in other parts of the Highlands the tensions between crofter and landlord impinged on everyday life, here, the struggle with the natural environment was primary.

The great importance of this feat of retention by Nan MacKinnon cannot be fully appreciated from a partial description such as this. Only the presentation of the repertoire in full will show its complexity of structure and theme and its value in the study of a community for which documentary sources are few.

It can be said in conclusion that Nan's importance as a bearer of tradition does not lie in her songs alone. During a period of a fortnight in June she recorded from memory over one thousand Gaelic proverbs, clearly illustrating the application of each one. This unique collection will form the subject of a separate study.

NOTES

[1] Gaelic texts will normally be given without punctuation. Translations will have punctuation where it is necessary to avoid ambiguity.

[2] While a substantial number of Nan's songs appear to be unique to her repertoire, variants of some are found in other areas and in printed sources. The examples are all drawn from Nan's repertoire, and it is outside the purpose of this paper to make textual comparisons between these and versions from other sources.

[3] Types of syllabic refrains found with women's songs generally have been discussed by the writer in "The Sub-literary Tradition in Gaelic Song Poetry I". *Eigse* 7: 217-39

[4] Since questions of structure are not discussed here, the syllabic refrains accompanying this and most of the other examples are not given.

[5] *Siunnsar* is taken here to be a corruption of *cuinnsear*, Gaelicisation of English "whinger".

[6] ". . . of a most notorious theif and wicked outlawe, which had lyved all his time of spoyles and robberies one of theire Bardes in his praise said, that he was none of those Idle milke-sopps that was brought vpp by the fyer syde, but that most of his dayes he spent in armes and valiant enterprises, that he did never eate his meate before he had wonne yt with his sworde, that he laye not slugginge all night in a Cabben vnder his mantle, but vsed comonlie to kepe others wakinge, to defende theire lyves, and did light his candle at the flame of theire howses . . ."[14] From *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, ed. W. L. Renwick (London 1934) 97. See also "The Statutes of Iona", particularly V and VIII, printed in *A Source Book of Scottish History*, ed. Dickinson, Donaldson, and Milne (Edinburgh 1954) 265-70.

[7] Duplication of a monosyllable in order to make up the requisite number of syllables is not unusual in a divided line of this kind.

[8] The compositional use of formulas is discussed by the writer in "Formulaic Composition in Gaelic Oral Literature" *Modern Philology* 57: 1-12.

[9] For a discussion of the Pastourelle in Irish tradition see Seán Ó Tuama; "An Pastourelle sa Ghaeilge". *Eigse* 8: 181-96.

[10] The term "bard" is usually reserved for a poet trained in syllabic versification, and cannot, strictly speaking, be applied to seventeenth century Scottish poets such as Iain Lom and Mary MacLeod. Metrical innovation does not, however, conceal an identity of purpose. The similar social function of the Scottish poets dictated a choice of theme that is in no important way different from that of the bards. When social function and not metrical form is being considered, a more extended use of the term is permissible.

[11] These remarks elaborate a previous discussion of some aspects of this subject in "The Sub-literary Tradition in Gaelic Song Poetry II". *Eigse* 8: 1-17.

[12] Translated from the text given by J. Carmichael Watson, *Gaelic Songs of Mary MacLeod* (Glasgow 1934) 54.