Book Reviews

The Ballad as Narrative. Studies in the Ballad Tradition of England, Scotland, Germany and Denmark by Flemming G. Andersen, Otto Holzapfel and Thomas Pettitt. Odense University Press, Odense 1982. viii + 162 pp. Dan. kr. 140.

This well presented sewn paperback has an appetising title but it turns out both gastronomically and nutritionally disappointing, perhaps because there were too many cooks. The broad aim is to examine oral qualities of poetic style for insights into the way a metrical story is—not transmitted, the usual preoccupation—but performed effectively. A 'balladic mode' is postulated, and if we can swallow the adjective we can undoubtedly find sense in this, for who can fix limits to a ballad corpus by genre definition? The hypothesis incurs a risk: scrutiny of non-narrative poetry may reveal that 'balladic' mode really has little that is exclusively generic about it at all and that we have been talking about features that recur across the whole range of metrical oral literature, not to speak of 'prose'. But the book does not examine any purely non-narrative lyric, so it does not confront the problem.

Ten chapters dealing with eleven songs traverse a range of topics difficult to characterise. From various British ballads the first five elicit the facts that (1) religious ballads are an important category, (2) oral ballads may occur on broadsides, (3) the English, as well as the Scots, learned songs orally in the eighteenth century, (4) broadside ballads may acquire oral features, (5) Jeannie Robertson is a traditional singer. Such thumbnail summarising does rough justice, but it reflects fairly enough that these authors take a long time about saying little and bring in much irrelevance. They show no special experience of oral literature in performance, mingle synchronic and diachronic perspectives in a confusing way, tend towards a magisterial style seeing 'problems'—undreamt of by the ordinary singer—everywhere. They lean heavily on David Buchan. Now and then they start an interesting line which their scope does not give room enough to develop, such as the distribution of the 'death-and-burial' motif discussed on pages 69-70.

The following five chapters, four on German and one on Danish, comprise Otto Holzapfel's contribution. They very usefully inform an English-speaking specialised public about unfamiliar poetic traditions, while pursuing their main aim of making these illustrate more generally the narrative theme of the title. The theme continues to elude the reader as the successive topics are unwound. Yet here he feels an authority and discipline that emanate reassuringly from a descriptive method not just looking for windmills to demolish.

Holzapfel's last chapter best illustrates his 'epic formula' concept. 'A formula is

''epic'' when in addition to conveying its primary information it has the function of adumbrating [*the translation is good but doesn't he mean* loading *or* endowing*?*] that information with supplementary expectation'—page 108. I dislike uses of the term 'epic' which dissociate it from genre, but the concept is plausible enough. And such features of *epic* poetry as symbolic gestures, traits *etc.* have long been recognised as meaningful beyond the literal level. In 'Stolt Ellensborg' Holzapfel notices four curious references to hair though he prefers to emphasise modes of dress and of address which signify frank or deceitful behaviour. These are clearly valid, but he leaves the hair un-disentangled. It is hardly enough to say that so droll a picture of astonishment or discomfiture as 'There stood Sir Peder As if ladies had cut his hair' derives from 'a proverb or saying of some kind', or to label 'illogical' the fact that Ellensborg *lets her hair grow* to look like a man (pp. 149-51). Is her behaviour illogical because this is the way a *man* usually disguises himself? Some clarification is needed. Anyway, a census of occurrences of descriptions of hair in Danish ballads is perhaps not to be sniffed at.

The chapter—and the book—ends by declaring that the 'epic' formula makes the ballad 'easy to remember and repeat', so rejoining studies that emphasise transmission, as Pettitt also did on page 10. These statements seem to distract from the main purpose of giving the 'epic' formula more than a mnemonic function, and to accept, moreover, a lot on trust. I remember the Irish singer of 'Prince Robert' who got repeatedly confused by the recurrence of similar but varying formulaic verses in successive scenes, and how I did the same myself when trying later to reproduce his song. Commonplace assertions of the memorability of formulaic matter are too often based on nothing more than common sense, which, deserving as it is of high respect, can be misleading.

I am not quite sure whether this book could have been written. There are some quite interesting drafts of it here, but they are mostly by the same person. Singers don't get a look in, not even Jeannie, and music is dismissed on page one.

HUGH SHIELDS

Hebridean Folksongs, vols. I-III, edited and translated by John Lorne Campbell, tunes transcribed and annotated by Francis Collinson. Clarendon Press, Oxford 1969, 1977, 1981.
Vol. I *A Collection of Waulking Songs by Donald MacCormick in Cille Pheadair, South Uist, in 1893*. 375 pp. [£3.50].
Vol. II *Waulking Songs from Barra, South Uist, Eriskay and Benbecula*. 367 pp. £15.
Vol. III *Waulking Songs from Barra, South Uist, Eriskay and Benbecula*. 432 pp. £25.

There is probably no other category of song in Scottish Gaelic as interesting as that of the Waulking Song. The songs are interesting, first, because of their apparent age,

although they are very difficult to date with any degree of certainty (but see *Tocher* 27, p. 157, where Donald Archie MacDonald sets out an argument for dating part of Song VIII in Volume I as round about 1539). They are interesting because of their apparent female authorship, at a time and within a culture where the opportunity to compose anything of note was undoubtedly the prerogative of the male. And they are interesting because of the unique quality of their melodic and verbal structure and content. What is more, few, if any, are still extant outside Gaelic Scotland.

Waulking was the process of finishing hand-woven cloth by pounding it, wet, on to a wooden board with the hands or the feet. The process varied in some of the details from place to place, but in all places it was the practice to accompany the work with singing. The phrases of the songs alternated between solo and chorus, and it is very likely that other work songs, such as rowing songs especially, became part of the Waulking song repertoire, when the relevant work went out of fashion.

Although Waulking remained, until about the mid-1940's, a fairly strong tradition, and although choral songs are still an attractive concept, there is a danger that the best tunes and especially the best texts, will disappear very soon. As John Lorne Campbell points out (Vol. I, p. 25), '. . . Waulking songs, not being felt suitable for literary treatment or for solo singing at concerts, have been neglected by the compilers of Gaelic anthologies and Gaelic songbooks.' John Mackenzie, the compiler of *Sàr obair nam bard Gaelach*, The Beauties of Gaelic Poetry (Edinburgh 1882), writes of *Iorram* (a type of working song that became incorporated into the Waulking song tradition): 'Various pieces of this sort are in our possession, but they are generally of little poetic merit, though the airs are sometimes cheering and melodious if well sung.' Mackenzie is probably referring to only one type of choral song which has very short solo phrases and short vocable refrains.

The publication in 1981 of the third volume of *Hebridean Folksongs* completed the series which started with the MacCormick Collection as Volume I. Donald MacCormick of Cille Pheadair, South Uist was a school attendance officer there in the 1890s. Volume I quotes a description of him by F. G. Rea in *A School in South Uist* as 'an educated man who spoke, read and wrote Gaelic and English quite fluently'. He was a collector of oral tradition and a bard, and when Dr John Lorne Campbell learned of his success in collecting, from the notebooks of Father Allan MacDonald of Eriskay (b. 1859 d. 1905), he searched earnestly for a manuscript that was mentioned, of Waulking songs transcribed by MacCormick. After a long time he ran it to ground in Edinburgh almost accidentally, when the late Hector MacIver (of Edinburgh's Royal High School)—from Lewis, and an enthusiast for Gaelic traditions—who knew of Dr Campbell's interest in Father Allan MacDonald's collections, sent him a manuscript which turned out to be the MacCormick Collection.

Negotiations were already being made for the publication of Father Allan's collections (and therefore the MacCormick Collection) in 1903, but nothing was achieved until Dr John Lorne Campbell published this work with the help and

collaboration of Francis Collinson, formerly musicologist on the staff of The School of Scottish Studies. (Both Dr Campbell and Mr Collinson are Honorary Research Fellows of the School.) Of Father Allan MacDonald, Dr Campbell says, 'had he lived, he and Amy Murray might well have developed a collaboration that would have much surpassed in interest that of Mrs Kennedy-Fraser and Kenneth MacLeod'. Amy Murray, who wrote *Father Allan's Island*, arrived in Eriskay from America in the last year of the priest's life.

Judging from Amy Murray's writings, Dr Campbell's statement cannot be denied, but in the light of subsequent events, I do not think that the fact that they were not able to collaborate on the MacCormick Collection is entirely a matter for regret. If a volume by MacDonald and Murray had already existed, Dr Campbell or his wife Margaret Fay Shaw, or both, might have been inspired to produce two further volumes of Waulking songs with the help of someone like Francis Collinson; we might have got the informative chapters that have been added to the bare texts, translations and musical transcriptions in Volumes II and III; we might even have had the extra material now contained in Volume I, incorporated in the other two volumes. But, while accepting Amy Murray's skills as a general folk musician, we must be grateful that Francis Collinson came to this task with years of experience in listening and annotating Gaelic song: he had already done the work on *The Traditional and National Music of Scotland* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1966); and, while Father Allan MacDonald's knowledge of the vocabulary of the songs was probably second to no-one's, Dr Campbell's approach must inevitably be better suited to the present day. The contributions made to Gaelic scholarship by the collaboration of Dr John Lorne Campbell and Francis Collinson in these three volumes is invaluable. As well as a total of 135 songs (with more than one version of some of them) with translations and tunes—several variants of some tunes—there are copious notes on both verbal and melodic texts, which combine the skills of the two editors: for example, in Volume I there is a chapter on 'The Waulking Pulse' and another on 'The Meaningless Refrain Syllables and their Significance'.

In Volume I there is a detailed description, with three photographs, of Waulking. There is a short chapter on 'The Subjects of the Songs' and a Bibliography running to nearly five pages with useful headings: 'Descriptions of Waulking', 'General', 'Musical Transcriptions (a) Objective (b) Art versions' 'Recordings', 'Articles in Periodicals', 'Printed Texts', 'Dictionary', 'MS Texts.'

With such a feast of information apart from the songs themselves in this volume—information that could be applied to Gaelic songs in general and not just to Waulking songs—the editors would have been excused for relaxing slightly over the production of Volume II. They could well have confined it to a publication of Gaelic words with English translations and musical transcriptions of more Waulking songs from Barra, South Uist, Eriskay and Benbecula. But no: they have added further to the reader's knowledge with more copious notes on the verbal and musical aspects of

the songs. There is a long note on the texts of each of four especially intriguing songs: *Am Bròn Binn* (the Sweet Sorrow); *Seathan, Mac Righ Eirinn* (Seathan, son of the King of Ireland); *Cailin òg as stiùramaiche* ('Calen o custure me'); and *An Spaidsearachd Bharrach* (The Barra Boasting). In Volume I the songs were transcribed by Donald MacCormick from his own collection, whereas the musical transcriptions were of versions collected by John Lorne Campbell and others at a much later date. In Volume II the words used with the melodies correspond with those in the first part of the book. The contents of the books are laid out so that the verbal texts, Gaelic and English translations, are completely separate from the melodic texts, which appear towards the end of each volume. It is easy to criticise this layout if we do not consider all the practical difficulties involved in any alternative. Dr Campbell explains these difficulties in Volume II and convinces us that the chosen layout is the only practical one.

Francis Collinson elaborates on his comments on the scales used, referring to examples from this volume. He also shows in great detail (fewer examples would probably have sufficed—but this is difficult to judge, from the viewpoint of the already informed) the melodic treatment of the *svarabhakti* vowel. He defines the *svarabhakti* thus: it 'arises between certain consonants following a short vowel under certain conditions, forms a group with the preceding vowel and consonant which falls under one stress.' (It is slightly similar to, but much more significant and complicated than, the intrusion of an extra vowel in *girl* and *warm* to be heard in some Scots dialects.)

There is not quite so much extra detail in Volume II as in Volume I—the editors have not gone that extra mile with us—but in Volume III there is still more information about 'The Waulking—for the sake of readers who have not read Volume I'. There are photographs of four singers who are well-loved by anyone interested in the study of traditional Gaelic songs. There is a fascinating and useful chapter on 'Some Motifs and Formulas of the Older Waulking Songs'. One of the interesting aspects of Waulking song texts is the insight they give us into the *mores* of another age and the ideals of excellence in person and personality. John Lorne Campbell summarises references to food and drink thus: 'Food and drink in better circumstances is variously described as "the breast milk of white-palmed women", cow's milk, beer, ale, wine and whisky; in bad circumstances as soup made from limpets or green shore crabs (partain), in one case as a "miserable pancake" (breacag shuarrach).' Musical instruments referred to are harp, fiddle and bagpipes; death and funerals are often mentioned, as are curses, and dowries; and there are formulaic numbers, used in a similar way to that in which they are used in Scots and other ballads and stories.

Also in Volume III there are further observations on the refrain vocables, a page-and-a-half addition to the extensive Bibliography of Volume I, and an important chapter on comparisons between some of the songs as published by Mrs Kennedy-Fraser and the more authentically traditional versions contained in *Hebridean Folksongs*—the authors compare sixty airs in all.

John Lorne Campbell's own more literal, non-rhyming translations are a great improvement on those in Volume I, described by another reviewer very aptly as being in the style of 'Hiawatha'! There are one or two important errors, however. I have the advantage, that Dr Campbell does not have, of Gaelic as a first language, and I have had many years of practice in transcribing Gaelic; nevertheless I can still have reason to blush over my own faulty and sometimes ridiculous transcriptions, and it is in a spirit of humility, and of sympathy, that I now point out some errors in *Hebridean Folksongs*, most of them from Volume II.

Vol. II, l. 412: *Dh'aithnghinn*, 'I would know'—for *dh'aindeoin*, in spite of'.

l. 506: . . . *an Gleann-dubh mo laithean*, 'for my days'—for *mu laighinn*, 'before I would go to bed'. This particular example was from a song 'taken down from Mrs Neil MacInnis, Cape Breton', that is, the misunderstanding is presumably caused by a written form, with some lapse of time since the hearing.

l. 549, 578 and 583: '*S gu dē mo ghnothach, a Cholla?—a Cholla* each time translated as if a person was being addressed. The comma should be removed and the reference then is obviously to the island of Coll, that is, 'what is my business to (in) Coll?' The place-name, I am told by colleagues, should strictly speaking be spelt *Cola*, and its pronunciation conforms better with the assonance in this song.

l. 1540: *Saor an tàthaidh*, 'joiner' (in the glossary, *tàthadh*, 'joining together') for *Saor an t-sàbhaidh*, a formulaic phrase used in many songs for 'joiner of the sawing'.

l. 476: *O'n luath i*, from the ashes she'—for, more probably, *O'n luathaidh*, 'from the ashes', using the dative form. The translation given is correct, however.

l. 435: *uaimh*, 'cave'—for *uaigh*, 'grave', must, I think, have been a slip of the pen or the type, as I also think is line 625 in Volume III where *dh'innseadh* appears instead of *innseadh*. Again, the translations are correct.

The refrain starting at line 1272 in Volume III as *Phàil ó*, 'O, Paul', is suspect. A vocable *Fàil* is much more likely.

Virginia Blankenhorn, writing in *Celtica* XV, presents a fairly convincing argument against John Lorne Campbell's theory that Waulking song texts were improvised by the women who took part in the work. The theory is presented at various points in Volume I and later in Volume III. A lot of improvisation took place in Lewis in the latter years of Waulking, and a woman there remarked to me recently that 'the words were just made up as they went along'. This is, regrettably, true to some extent and as a result many fine texts have been replaced by doggerel. Is it possible, therefore, that something similar happened in a nobler age when poetic skills were more finely tuned? We cannot counter Dr Campbell's argument by asking how the songs were

then remembered after one rendering at the waulking board, because we know that even eighty years ago some people's memories were phenomenal. It seems doubtful that the songs would be capable of repetition by those present if they were actually improvised under semi-trance conditions (see pp. 7 and 8, Vol. III). If vocable refrains were a means of identifying songs—admittedly they may only have become so at a later date—,how did they become separated from sections of text? For example Song XII in Volume I has a section which commonly has a refrain

Hill ù ill é ill e illó
Horó 's tu mo chuachag, etc.

—quite different from that given in the book. There are many different versions of the song known as *A' Bhean Eudach,* which often has the opening lines of Song III in Volume I. One cannot but feel at least uneasy with the certainty of John Lorne Campbell's statement on page 22, Volume I '. . . the bulk of it was extemporized by women at the waulking board . . .' and even more when he adds the following: 'with the likelihood that different sections of the same song were extemporized by different persons' (Vol. III, p. 7). I think that on this question we can only attain to speculation.

The musical transcriptions are meticulously done, as far as one can judge without checking on individual items with the requisite recording. The alignment of note to syllable is particularly careful, and we presume that this is the result of very close collaboration between the two editors.

These are books for the layman and the scholar. The writing is clear and unpretentious in both the melodic and the verbal section. The jump in price from £3.50 for Volume I to £25.00 for Volume III is indicative of the rate of inflation from 1969 to 1981. In spite of their high cost the books are well worth buying, and will be referred to again and again by anyone who is fortunate enough to own them. Finally, they are a great tribute to all singers and bearers of any kind of tradition who have given joy, and will continue to give joy, to those who are interested in what they have passed on. The editors have not been slow to acknowledge their debt to the singers, and the Dedication in Volume II to the 'memory of Annie and Calum Johnston, Roderick Mackinnon and Mrs Neil Campbell and the other singers of Barra and Uist who have passed away' represents the gratitude that we should all like to express to the wonderful tradition-bearers whom we have been privileged to meet, whether on tape or in person.

MORAG MACLEOD

Books Received

(Some of these books may be reviewed later in *Scottish Studies*)

Hebridean Folksong, vol. III: *Waulking Song from Barra, South Uist, Eriskay and Benbecula.* Edited and translated by John Lorne Campbell, tunes transcribed and annotated by Francis Collinson. Clarendon Press, Oxford 1981. 432 pp. £25.

The Little General and the Rousay Crofters. Crisis and Conflict on an Orkney Estate by William P. L. Thomson. John Donald, Edinburgh 1981. 234 pp. £15.

Progress and Poetry. The Enlightenment and Scottish Literature by John MacQueen. Scottish Academic Press, Edinburgh 1982. 158 pp. £7.50.

Joseph Black 1728–1799. A Commemorative Symposium. Papers presented at a Symposium held in the Royal Scottish Museum on 4th Nov. 1978 in association with the Scottish Society of the History of Medicine, together with a Survey of Manuscript Notes of Joseph Black's Lectures on Chemistry. Edited by A. D. C. Simpson. Royal Scottish Museum Studies, The Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh 1982. 70 pp. £4.

The Historical Geography of Scotland since 1707 by David Turnock. Cambridge University Press 1982. 352 pp. £25.

Order in Space and Society. Architectural Form and its Context in the Scottish Enlightenment, edited by Thomas A. Markus. Mainstream, Edinburgh 1982. 322 pp. £20. (Most pages illustrated with black-and-white photographs, plans or drawings.)

Editorial Note

The booklet for the School's double album, *The Muckle Sangs* (TNGM 119/D in the *Scottish Tradition* series of discs and cassettes) was revised and reprinted in 1979 and accompanied all albums subsequently sold. Copies of the revised booklet should be obtained from Topic Records Ltd, 50 Stroud Green Road, London N4 3EF. The price per copy is 50p plus 32p postage.