

***Gun Sireadh, Gun Iarraidh: The Tolmie Collection.* Kenna Campbell and Ainsley Hamill, eds. Stornoway: Acair, 2023. 351 pp., map, illus. Hardback and wire-bound. ISBN (hardback): 978-1-78907-109-2; ISBN (wire-o bind) 978-1-78907-142-9. £20.00.**

Frances Tolmie's collection of *One Hundred and Five Gaelic Songs of Occupation from the Western Isles of Scotland*, published in the *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* in 1911, has long been regarded as a seminal work. Whereas most anthologies of songs and music of the period consisted of arrangements designed for the parlour performer in which the melodies had been modified, modernised and provided with piano accompaniments, Tolmie's collection presented songs as she had learned and collected them from tradition-bearers in their own communities. She was the earliest to be recognised and widely praised for having done so.

Although Tolmie began collecting around 1860, it was not until 1900 that Gaelic scholar George Henderson, whom she had met at the home of Alexander Carmichael in Taynuilt, suggested publication. As Ethel Bassin has made clear, however, the process was far from straightforward, because what became known as 'The Tolmie Collection' was the work not just of Frances Tolmie herself, but of a four-strong – and strong-willed – editorial committee whose substantial notes and commentary account for over a quarter of the finished work, and whose robust opinions and diverse interests inform much of its character.¹ Its character is significant because, while the content provided by Frances Tolmie is self-effacing and modest in its presentation, it is these editorial contributions that date the work to the Celtic Revival, a period when educated, middle-class urban dwellers took an intense interest in the cultural reliquiae of rural folk.

Led by Lucy E. Broadwood of the London-based Folk-Song Society, the editorial team included English song-collector Anne G. Gilchrist, music critic J. A. Fuller Maitland, and Gaelic scholar George Henderson. The latter was tasked with overseeing the Gaelic text, Broadwood and Gilchrist provided introductory essays, and all four contributed commentary on individual songs, including historical references, philological speculation, and musicological comparisons with melodies from other traditions. This volume was clearly intended as a serious contribution to the study of folksong, especially in its melodic aspects, and it demanded the reader's full attention – even if the reader knew no Gaelic. Indeed, it was their cognizance of this last fact that apparently led the editorial committee to truncate or omit many of the Gaelic song-texts in favour of English translations, directing those wishing fuller Gaelic texts to well-known anthologies of Gaelic poetry. From a modern perspective, this was an unfortunate compromise, as Tolmie's informants were unlikely to have sung precisely what appeared in those anthologies, and it is the uniqueness and authenticity of their own versions that most interest us today.

Kenna Campbell has devoted her life to championing the Gaelic language and its musical traditions. A member of a well-known Skye family of singers and musicians, Campbell was an early trustee of Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, now part of the University of the Highlands and Islands; she tutored students in Gaelic and Scottish song at the Royal Scottish Conservatoire (RSC) in Glasgow; and she was a founder member of Bannal, a group of eight female singers specialising in Gaelic waulking songs. Her achievements have been recognised with an honorary doctorate from Sabhal Mòr Ostaig and, in 2017, an OBE. As Dr Priscilla Scott remarks in her introduction to the present volume,

¹ Ethel Bassin, *The Old Songs of Skye: Frances Tolmie and her Circle*, ed. Derek Bowman (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), 95–115.

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Campbell's Skye background and her devotion to the singing traditions of the Gael meant that 'it would be difficult to find someone more uniquely placed to have undertaken this project' (44).

This was, however, no small undertaking. In deciding to re-edit Tolmie's collection, Campbell had to choose between focusing solely upon Tolmie's songs and notes, or including all of the additional material and scholarly commentary contributed by Broadwood and her editorial team. Choosing the latter course, she then needed to recruit her own editorial committee. Dr Jo Miller, a former colleague of Campbell's at the RSC and herself a traditional musician, sensibly assesses Annie Gilchrist's contribution, noting how her system of modal analysis continued to influence scholarly understanding of traditional melodic structure for a considerable time (68–70). Gaelic singer and broadcaster Mary Ann Kennedy considers the manuscript evidence and the light it sheds both upon Tolmie's fieldwork practice and upon the decisions of the original editors (71–75); she compares Tolmie's transcriptions with wax-cylinder recordings of fourteen items recorded from Tolmie's singing by the redoubtable Marjory Kennedy-Fraser – recordings that illuminate the difficulty of accurately rendering the subtlety and warmth of traditional performance in written form (75–77); and finally, she provides an inventory of those recordings, held by the Centre for Research Collections, Edinburgh University (Appendix 3). Dr Priscilla Scott, whose doctoral dissertation discusses Tolmie and her contemporaries,² provides a warmly appreciative introduction in both Gaelic and English summarising Frances Tolmie's biography and describing the logistical challenges that faced the original publication (20–44). Ainsley Hamill, co-editor of the volume and a former singing student of Campbell's at the RSC, has overseen production of the musical examples.

Following a map and a selection of photographs, the songs themselves are grouped and presented in the same order as in the original publication, the great difference being that fuller Gaelic texts of all songs are now provided. The addition of three further songs from Tolmie's manuscripts is a welcome expansion of the original project, although it would have been good to know where and from whom Tolmie noted the second and third of these items, assuming she recorded such information. The third song, 'Ailein Duinn, ó-hì, shiùbhlainn leat!' (Song 108), is one that Tolmie contributed to Keith Norman MacDonald's *Gesto Collection*, and it shares some stanzas with two others in the Tolmie Collection, 'Ailein Duinn, beul a' mhànrain' (Song 48) and 'Shiùbhlainn, shiùbhlainn' (Song 67).³

There are four appendices. The first of these, entitled 'Sources of Gaelic Texts' (330–334), deserves some of our attention in light of Kenna Campbell's own comments. In her preface, she praises Tolmie for collecting 'both words and music, exactly as she had heard them from the folk around her, ... [noting] where she had heard them, when and from whom, together with any additional information about the songs or the singers that caught her interest' and explains that 'the prime purpose of embarking on this new edition of the collection has been to recover these Gaelic texts and to present the songs as Frances learned them and noted them' (15). These remarks set out what appears to be a clear declaration of intent, namely, that the new edition will restore Tolmie's Gaelic texts in their entirety, and that the songs will thus represent what Tolmie heard 'from the folk around her'. Appendix 1 reveals that, in addition

² Priscilla Scott, 'With heart and voice ever devoted to the cause': Women in the Gaelic Movement, 1886–1912 (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2014).

³ Keith Norman MacDonald (1997 [1895]), *The Gesto Collection of Highland Music* (Southend-on-Sea: Llanerch Press, 1997 [1895]), Appendix, p. 61. The online database Tobar an Dualchais (www.tobarandualchais.org) provides at least eleven performances of 'Ailein Duinn, an nì 's an nàire' (a more common title for Tolmie's Song 48) and at least twenty-seven of 'Ailein Duinn, ó-hì, shiùbhlainn leat' (Song 108).

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to those songs reprinted as they originally appeared in *JFSS*, the texts to thirty-three songs have been restored, in whole or in part, by reference to the Tolmie MSS in the National Library of Scotland, and printed sources to which Tolmie had earlier contributed the songs in question, chiefly Keith Norman MacDonald's *Gesto Collection* (1895) and his *Puirt-à-Beul* (1901).

Appendix 1 further reveals, however, that nineteen of the Gaelic texts contain at least some material which cannot be linked to Tolmie's collecting. Consequently, some of the tunes given by Tolmie in *JFSS* are now associated – despite their ascription to specific informants – with hybridized texts combining the informant's words with additional text not provided by that informant.⁴ Because issues of textual integrity, authenticity and 'ownership' are today important to both scholars and potential performers, the differentiation between the textual elements that Tolmie herself collected and those added from other sources must be clearly noted, either in notes adjacent to the song-texts themselves or in footnotes. While this has sometimes been done, many of these references are found only in Appendix 1, where they are easily overlooked.

We must of course acknowledge that many scholars – never mind singers – have taken a relaxed view of such hybridization. In Tolmie's day, textual elements were likely to be regarded as fungible, as evidenced by her own hybrid versions of three of these nineteen songs.⁵ Both Tolmie herself and her original editors referred readers to published sources for versions of songs in the collection, clearly believing that one version of a text would do as well as another. The Rev. William Matheson, himself an important resource for Kenna Campbell, drew upon a variety of sources in his own singing – a traditional practice, to be sure, expedited in Matheson's time by the rapidly expanding corpus of materials, printed and recorded, available to him. In our own day, many singers do not hesitate to collate texts from a variety of sources and media, perhaps (and probably correctly) assuming that their audiences will not notice or care about such interpolations. Today's singers will no doubt be glad to have these hybrid texts, which are of sufficient length to support a convincing performance. Indeed, Campbell stated her intention 'to rewrite and reprint the collection in a format that was faithful to the original, but that would also satisfy the requirements of singers, musicians, teachers and students' (16). That the work is intended both as a work of scholarship and as a source for would-be performers is underlined by the fact that it is available not just in hardback but also in a wire-bound format for easy placement on a music stand.

For scholars, however, the ability to locate a given text or tune within a particular community or even a family tradition is important, not only because it allows us to appreciate the cultural heritage of that community at a given time, but because it helps us understand the organic process of oral transmission in the years before the wide availability of sound recordings and mass media overwhelmed that process. With our greater appreciation of the social context and shared meaning of cultural phenomena within specific communities, we have gained a greater respect for the integrity of individual representations of such phenomena, however fragmentary or otherwise altered by the vicissitudes of oral tradition they may be.

Unlike Marjory Kennedy Fraser's *Songs of the Hebrides*, Keith Norman MacDonald's *Gesto Collection* and many other productions of the same era, Tolmie's collection was not originally published as a resource for performance. Rather, as Mary Ann Kennedy points out, it was intended 'purely for the preservation of what she heard, with no thought to self-promotion' (72). Although

⁴ Songs 10, 21, 31, 51, 64, 65, 67, 73, 85, 86, 87, 89, 91, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99 and 104.

⁵ Songs 21, 67 and 89.

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many collectors and editors down to our own time have adapted, arranged and re-purposed Tolmie's material for commercial consumption, Tolmie and her editors clearly intended the 1911 *Journal* as a work of scholarship. As such, it has been a crucially important source for those investigating Gaelic song and the communities that nurtured it in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Scholarly veneration for Tolmie's work reflects the fact that her transcriptions genuinely represent the songs she collected from people she knew personally – and that, in those cases where she included material from other sources, she was careful to include references to those sources next to the items in question. The current volume, unfortunately, often requires the reader to turn to Appendix 1 in order to investigate the additional sources used by the editor in reconstructing some of these texts. While most of the necessary clues necessary for such investigation have been provided, we may wonder how many readers will take the trouble to follow them.

As for the other appendices, the second (335–37) contains George Henderson's transcription of a South Uist version of 'Cumha Sheathain' (Song 51), originally printed in *JFSS* over Tolmie's objection, and now fortunately replaced – in the main – by the version Tolmie collected from Mary Ross in Skye.⁶ Appendix 3, as noted, usefully inventories Kennedy-Fraser's wax-cylinder recordings of Frances Tolmie singing fourteen of the songs in the collection. Appendix 4, however, is a mystery, consisting of a transcription of the late Rev. William Matheson's performance of 'Uamh an Òir' as found on Tobar an Dualchais.⁷ While four fragments of 'Uamh an Òir' appear in Tolmie's collection (Nos. 1–4), the likely connection between these and Matheson's version is not discussed.

Technical aspects of this publication are disappointing. For a scholarly publication, which this purports to be, a sound critical apparatus is essential to future research. A general index would have been helpful, especially given the number of people involved in editing this collection over the past century and the wide variety of topics, themes, concepts, and additional sources they discussed. For the same reason, consistent and accurate citation of relevant sources, linked to a comprehensive bibliography, would have helped greatly. Unfortunately, the bibliography amounts to little more than a background reading list, as it omits many of the sources mentioned in the book itself by members of either editorial team. But while the lack of apparatus may frustrate scholars, it may matter less if the principal audience for this book was in fact imagined to be students and singers, as opposed to academics.

As regards the editor's sourcing of supplementary material, a curious question arises in connection with two of the Fenian lays that Tolmie collected from Margaret MacLeod in Portree in 1870. Of one of these, 'Laoidh Oscair' (Song 87), *JFSS* gave only two stanzas. Kenna Campbell tells us (275) that she has restored a further two stanzas from Tolmie's manuscripts, and added three more from *Leabhar na Féinne*.⁸ The question arises because, if *Leabhar na Féinne* was indeed her source, she has taken

⁶ The caveat is needed, because while the restored version of 'Cumha Sheathain' contains twenty-one stanzas that Tolmie recorded from Mary Ross, five additional stanzas have been interpolated from a version collected by Mary MacKellar in Lochaber, and another two from *Carmina Gadelica* – meaning that Mary Ross's stanzas account for only three-quarters of those represented here. See Mary MacKellar, 'The Waulking Day', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* 13 (1886–87): 206; and Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* (Floris Press, 2006 [1900–1971], vol. 5, 66.

⁷ Although stating that it was transcribed from a 1979 recording of William Matheson available on Tobar an Dualchais ([Track ID 68553](#)), the transcription in Appendix 4 is identical – apart from an obvious error in bar 4 – to that of a 1969 recording by Matheson that was printed in *Tocher*; see 'Three Fairy Songs', *Tocher* 47 (1993–94): 280–81; also Tobar an Dualchais [Track ID 86909](#).

⁸ John Francis Campbell, *Leabhar na Féinne* (London: Spottiswoode & Co, 1872.), 193. J. F. Campbell's source was the Gillies Collection (1786).

some odd liberties with it. While *LF* stanza 54 refers to an incident having taken place in Dundalk in Ireland, the corresponding stanza here relocates the incident to Dùn Sgàthaich on the Sleat peninsula – a place associated not with Oscar or any other Fenian character, but rather with the Ulster Cycle, where it is the site of Cú Chulainn’s training by the female warrior Sgàthach. Comparing stanzas 6 and 7 with *LF* stanzas 63 and 62 reveals additional divergences. These editorial changes are so inexplicable that one wonders if these three stanzas (2, 6 and 7) might have come not from *LF*, but from Kenna Campbell’s own Skye tradition – a legitimate source, especially given the locus of Tolmie’s collecting and Campbell’s own background. But if that is the case, why not say so? And might a similar explanation account for the odd change made in Donald Archie MacDonald’s transcription of stanzas from ‘Laoidh Fhraoich’ (Song 86) as sung by the Rev. William Matheson, seven of which Campbell has added to the four stanzas recorded from Margaret MacLeod? Where MacDonald has transcribed Matheson singing ‘Fraoch mac Fhiuthaich’ (which he translates ‘son of Fidach’), Kenna Campbell has changed the hero’s patronymic to ‘mac Idhaidh’, while retaining MacDonald’s translation.⁹

Many of the problems highlighted here can no doubt be attributed to lack of editorial support. The task Kenna Campbell set herself was a daunting one, given her two-fold objective of completing the long-wished-for restoration of Tolmie’s Gaelic texts in order to ‘present the songs as Frances learned them and noted them’ while also creating a practical song collection that would ‘satisfy the requirements of singers, musicians, teachers and students’. An experienced academic editor might have helped her navigate the difficulty of serving these two very different audiences, perhaps by suggesting a different approach to the hybridizing of some texts which, while the result may suit the practical needs of singers, creates unnecessary confusion for those who might have assumed that all of the texts were collected by Tolmie. If the work were solely intended for scholars, it would ideally have gone through a rigorous process of peer review and revision followed by professional layout, copy-editing, formatting, and proof-reading – a process that would have corrected many errors and inconsistencies and made the text easier to read. Unfortunately, even academic presses these days commonly expect authors themselves to master all of those technical skills and submit camera-ready copy – a daunting task that must have been especially challenging in this case. Acair, a commercial publisher specialising in Gaelic and in children’s books, may not have been equipped to offer Campbell the sort of

Frances Tolmie
Gun Sireadh, Gun Iarraidh

A' dèanamh luaidh air saothair agus dileab Frangaig Tolmaich
Celebrating the contribution and legacy of Frances Tolmie

14.30 - Tilleadh dhachaigh: Oraid leis an An Dtr. Priscilla Scott
Frangag Tholmach agus na ceanglaichean ri coimhearsnachd, càirdeas agus tilleadh dhachaigh. Frances Tolmie and links to community, homecoming and more.

15.45 - Gun Sireadh, Gun Iarraidh: An Dtr. Ceana Chaimbeul MBE
Cothrom còmhraidh mun chruinneachadh de dhòrain agus eachdraidh-beatha Frangaig Tolmaich, a dheasaich Ceana cuide ri Ainslie Hamill
An informal question and answer session to learn more about Frances Tolmie, her life and the songs from the collection edited by Kenna along with Ainslie Hamill

19.30 - Cèilidh Coimhearsnachd | Community Cèilidh
Cèilidh le òrain bhon chruinneachadh aig Frangag Tholmach is eile
Evening Cèilidh with songs from the Tolmie Collection and others in the company of
Kenna Campbell, Seumas Campbell, Mary Ann Kennedy, Deirdre Graham, Kathleen Macdonald, Eilidh MacKenzie & Family and musicians from **Fèis Thròndairnis**

Tickets - www.blas.scot - tiogaidean

Afternoon talks only	£10.00
Afternoon talks and community dinner	£15.00
Evening cèilidh only	£14.00/£12.00 (conc)/£34.00 (family)
Whole event (talks, pre-cèilidh dinner and evening cèilidh)	£25.00
Clann-sgoile Schoolchildren	£5.00

Tickets will also be available on the door but it would be helpful if advance booking could be made

Simultaneous translation will be available at afternoon sessions for attendees without Gaelic
Fàilte ron a h-uile duine
All welcome

Diardaoin 7mh An t-Sultain | Thursday 7th September
Talla Chille Mhoire | Kilmuir Hall

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MAOIN NAN EALAN GAIDHLIG **LOTTERY FUNDED** **Bòrd na Gàidhlig** **Blas festival**

Fig. 1 Advertisement for a promotional event in Skye, September 2023.

⁹ Tobar an Dualchais, [Track ID 17302](#); *Tocher* 35: 292–97. MacDonald’s English translation of these seven stanzas is used without acknowledgement.

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support she needed. The element of time may also have been a factor: a planned launch and concert at Celtic Connections in 2023, to be followed by a series of promotional events throughout Scotland (see *Fig. 1*), may have added pressure to bring the volume out.

Kenna Campbell and her editorial team are to be congratulated for what was undoubtedly a labour of love. Their diligence in researching Tolmie's manuscripts and the wax-cylinder recordings – research long overdue – greatly enriches our appreciation not just of the songs Tolmie recorded, but of the exemplary fieldwork practice that put her informants at ease and acknowledged them as partners in her collecting project. Frances Tolmie, honest and self-effacing, made no promises that she did not keep, and insisted to her first editors that the work represent her values. This new edition respects and honours Tolmie's industry, and provides singers and those with a general interest in Gaelic song a further resource that they will certainly welcome. Scholars, too, will find much to approve, even if the best guidance for them might be 'handle with care'.

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