

Researched by:
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SONGS OF THE HEBRIDES

The Songs and the Story of Marjory Kennedy Fraser

A 13th Century Love Lilt

Many of us have visited the islands of the Hebrides, lying there in a chain off the west coast of Scotland, wild and beautiful. Skye, Mull, Harris, Lewis, Eriskay, Benbecula, the holy island of Iona – they have a culture stretching back for more than 2,000 years, passed from generation to generation in legend and song – legends of Gods and heroes, fairies and saints, work songs, love songs, songs of the sea.

It was for her pioneering work in writing down the songs of the Hebrides, in the days before TV, radio or any recorded sound, that Marjory Kennedy Fraser became famous. All our songs today are from her three volumes of 'Songs of the Hebrides' published between 1909 and 1921.

So who was she?

Marjory Kennedy was born in 1858 in Perth, the fifth child of David Kennedy, a renowned singer of traditional Lowland Scots song. She learned to play the piano from an early age and made her first appearance on the concert platform as accompanist to her father soon after her 12th birthday.

In her autobiography she writes:

'After a long tour in the north of Scotland I became fully established as my father's accompanist. Kennedy was then the most famous living Scots singer. He travelled incessantly, fulfilling his mission to carry the songs of Scotland to all the Scots scattered abroad – and now, plans were made for a round the world tour, beginning in Australia.

We sailed from Glasgow in the sailing ship *Ben Ledi*, one of the then famous clipper ships whose record breaking runs were eagerly watched for. We were bound without a break for Melbourne, a far away port, not yet linked up with the rest of the world by cable. Three months we sailed the seas, nor once touching land, through the tropics, becalmed in the doldrums, down into the roaring forties, far southwards towards the cold Antarctic. Day after day, week after week, month after month we sailed, our own family the only occupants of the saloon. We carried our own little piano with us, a 'grand', specially cut down for convenience in

extracts

from: M.K.F., "A Life of Song" (OUP, 1929)

travel, to the Mozartean compass of four and a half octaves. Daily and assiduously we carried on our musical studies with our father. In my diary I recorded the daily menu, the sighting of an island, the catching of a shark or albatross, the crossing of the line, the battened down hatches in foul weather, and the enormous glens and hills of the sea. And we ran great risks, all our canvas spread in the race for speed. We several times well nigh turned turtle, a sudden squall coming upon us with all our canvas spread. Such a rush then of hurrying feet, every man to reefing. Never have I sensed such speed, save perhaps many years later when I was song collecting in the little isle of Eriskay in the Outer Hebrides, and a sudden change of wind and current made it possible at last to leave the shore for the other side.’ 3 mins

The Black Loorgin The Mermaid’s Croon

In Melbourne the Kennedy family was so popular that they sang every night, six nights a week, for three months; they were only allowed to depart after a special civic gathering and presentation.

She writes

‘From Melbourne we planned an 18 month driving tour through Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. – one cannot say by road, for roads there were none.

The bush, smelling like a chemists shop, was totally unlike the woods of Scotland. Gum trees standing wide apart, the leaves long and thin turning their edges to the sun, gave little shade, the earth was dry and hard.

The tracks were infested by bush rangers. These desperate gangs held up travellers and stole all their goods and money. The Kelly gang, famous for murder and pillage, was finally caught on a road between Sydney and Melbourne just a few days before our route took us over the same track. There were frequent hot winds and dreaded dust storms, occasional locust plagues too.

On the route from Melbourne to Sydney there were few towns, but if a halt had to be made, if a hall or even a barn was available, we gave a concert. Our audience would arrive mainly on horseback, simply tethering their horses out to some fence for the ‘Twa Hoors at Hame’ as my father called his miscellaneous Scots programme. For the sake of those two hours many a Scot has ridden well nigh 100 miles and back.’

2 mins

The Exiles Dream

Dance to your Shadow

The family travelled on, visiting Tasmania and New Zealand, then crossed the Pacific to California. They toured in comfort by Pullman through the USA, then in the autumn and winter they toured in Canada, singing in 6 towns per week and two Presbyterian churches on Sundays, sometimes travelling by open sleigh through snow storms at 20 degrees below zero.

She writes:

The tour came near to an end in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in June 1876, and with a fortnight in St John's, Newfoundland, we brought it to a close. I was now 18 years of age. And of all the sections into which my life naturally falls, perhaps this looms largest – a long unbroken period of four and a half years world touring with father, mother, brothers and sister, moving continually over the surface of land and sea.

Unforgettable years, leaving their mark so deeply incised that I can still feel, while rattling along the pavements of Princes Street under the shelter of Edinburgh Castle, that my mind is looking out over vast spaces, leaving behind the familiar and moving ever forwards towards the unknown. 2 mins

The Sea Quest

David Kennedy continued to make concert tours at home and abroad, and in time each of his eleven children appeared with him, singing or playing. They went to India and South Africa and re-visited Australia, New Zealand, the USA and Canada.

Between tours there was time for study in Italy and France. Marjory studied singing in Milan.

‘It was early in the winter of 1879 when I settled in with my brothers ,and was initiated into that unique old world of Italian singing. We shared a flat in the narrow street leading off the great Piazza. My brothers were studying with Lamperti and San Giovanni. I elected to work with an old ex-opera singer, Signora Gambardella, who had studied with the famous composer Rossini in the world of *bel canto*. Old Gambardella came daily to the flat and gave me a lesson of at least an hour and a half. She adored and detested me in turn. Lost in wonder at my musicianship, she was equally horrified by my lack of appreciation of the kind of tone she wanted from me on certain notes. I got my score thrown at my head quite frequently, and once in her uncontrollable wrath, the *maestra* tore a tortoise-shell comb out of my hair and threw it at the opposite wall!’

Later, studying in Paris with Mathilde Marchesi, she writes:

‘At our first interview, the famous *maestra* showed us a dried human larynx and explained the Garcia theory of *coup de glotte*. It was arranged that we should be admitted to her studio every morning at nine. There was no fixed hour, as with Lamperti, for individual lessons. She gave us the run of the studio from 9 till 6. Matthilde Marchesi was an extraordinarily clever woman with a vast knowledge of operatic tradition. She had an enormous will power, could speak to her polyglot class in the language of each and certainly tried to hammer them into capable artists. Her large bare, deal floored room contained only a grand piano and the necessary seating accommodation for the numerous students. The *maestra* sat at the piano and dispatched one singer after another, mostly with scathing criticism. She used to show her class a closed fist and say a career lay in that. It takes courage to be a public singer. Her favourite sneer for anyone who showed a lack of courage was ‘ You are fit only to marry!’

Unlike the Italian singing masters she did not confine her study material to opera arias, but included songs in the various languages of her many students. My grandfather had spoken only Gaelic in his youth, and it was after this that I started to introduce some Gaelic songs into our performances. 3 mins

The Bens of Jura
Kishmul’s Galley

Marjory did eventually marry - a young scientist, Alec Fraser, who taught at George Heriots Hospital in Edinburgh, and then became head of Allan Glen's Technical School, Glasgow. They had two children, a daughter, Patuffa, and David, named after his famous grandfather. 20 secs

The Christ Childs Lullaby **The Cockle Gatherer**

After only three years of marriage, Alec Fraser became very ill and in 1890 he died of pneumonia. M K-F moved with her two young children back to her mother's house in Edinburgh, where she lived for the next 15 years, teaching singing and piano, giving lecture-recitals and writing as music critic for the Evening News. Her young sister Jessie married, in London, the eminent piano teacher Tobias Matthay; through Jessie, Marjory heard about a collection of Breton folksongs arranged and published by Bourgault Ducaudray, Professor of Musical History in the Paris Conservatoire. She used some of these for a lecture-recital on Celtic music at one of the Summer Meetings (a kind of summer school) arranged in Edinburgh by Patrick Geddes. There she met a young Scots artist, John Duncan, who specialised in Celtic subjects.

She writes:

John Duncan knew I had long dreamed of doing original research work in Celtic music. So in 1904, when through a fellow painter he discovered so to speak the Isle of Eriskay, he instantly wrote to me that this was the place for my work, and that come out there I must. It was then a rather formidable decision. I at last faced it. So one night in the beginning of August 1905 I left by the night train for Oban. I little thought as I got on board the little steamer at Oban at 6 in the morning that I was sailing into a world that would hold me in its grip for the rest of my life. Wet, sick and weary, I stepped off the little steamer at Lochboisdale pier, where John Duncan and his friend Dr Taylor were waiting for me. They hurried me in a dreary drizzle of rain into an open fishing boat that was leaving at once for the isle. We were landed about a mile from the house that was to receive us, and I was seated at supper by about 9 o'clock. I had hardly drawn breath when John Duncan brought me in a little girl, Mary McInnes, who sat on my knee and sang island songs to me. In a little over 24 hours I had sailed I felt, out of the 20th century back at least into the 1600s. 3 mins

Milking Croon
Spinning Song
Hebridean Waulking Sog
A Lively Clapping Song

For the remaining 25 years of her life MKF poured her energy and skill into the task of preserving, publishing and performing the many songs she heard in the Hebrides. She wrote down the melodies in musical notation as they were being sung to her, occasionally making primitive recordings on the wax covered cylinders of a graphophone, which you can see even today at Edinburgh University.

There are many interesting stories in her autobiography of the island life and of the collecting of particular songs, but she ends:

‘The love for the songs of the Hebrides has spread all over Scotland and England and across the Atlantic. In 1927 we sang them in Amsterdam, the Hague and Paris. This Autumn we are preparing to visit Berlin, Prague and Vienna, and to represent Scotland in the League of Nations Folk-Art Congress.

To the old singers to whose enthusiasm we owe the preservation of the songs, we hand them on in their written form, with our thanks for the joy they have brought us, remembering an old Gaelic saying:

A short giving with the gold – a long giving with the song.

2 mins

An Eriskay Love Lilt.

The Seal Woman’s Croon
Land of Hearts Desire