

Patrick McDonald's Highland Vocal Airs¹

"More than a Century in Advance of His Time"²

by Lewis Jones

Lucy Broadwood accused all but one of the early collectors of Scottish folk music of mutilating and faking the tradition. The exception was Patrick McDonald, who published A Collection of Highland Vocal Airs in 1784.³

The Reverend Patrick McDonald (1729-1824) was born in Durness and became Minister of Kilmore in Argyllshire.⁴ The songs he records were sung in Gaelic, but, as the title of his book indicates, the words were not published. Thus what we have is a collection of tunes, numbered consecutively and divided into five sections.

The first and biggest section, "North Highland Airs," contains 86 tunes from Ross and Sutherland. Almost all of these, Patrick McDonald tells us in his Preface, were collected, not by himself, but by his brother Joseph. Joseph, we are told, was a classically trained musician. For a time he lived in Edinburgh, where he mingled with Pasquali and other masters. But he had been born in Strathnaver, "the most northerly district of Scotland," and he never lost his love for its traditional music. "While he played or sung those simple artless melodies," Patrick records, "his eyes frequently streamed with tears." In 1760 Joseph travelled to India where, just over a year later, he died of fever. Fortunately, however, he had left a manuscript collection of tunes with a sister, and Patrick was able to use these as the basis for the first part of his book.

The other sections of the book consist of tunes collected by Patrick McDonald himself. Those numbered from 87 to 114 were harvested during collecting trips into Perthshire. Tunes 115 to 155 were noted in Argyllshire at a time when McDonald was living in that county. Tunes 156 to 186 are from the Western Isles, and were gleaned "from the singing, and the friendly communications of some respectable gentlemen and ladies" who lived there. The final section of the book contains a

collection of "North Highland Reels and Country Dances." There are 32 dances, consecutively numbered, followed by five unnumbered and fairly extensive specimens of bagpipe music.

For those who enjoy playing through or studying folk music in private many happy hours could be spent with McDonald's book if only it were more readily available. Fans of American shape note hymns would hear many familiar cadences. I cannot find an exact match for tune number 29, for example, but it sounds sufficiently similar to "Weary Pilgrim", "Monroe" and, in particular, "Stockwood"⁵ to suggest that Highland emigrants took it with them to the New World.

The North Highland reels at the end of McDonald's book are still suitable for social dances today. See, for example, my transcription of number 31, "Harris Dance."⁶ However, for the "vocal airs" to be sung at clubs, concerts and festivals they need to be fitted to words. This I have attempted to do with number 18, "A Lewis Air." The resultant song is my (Anglicised) version of Child 25, "Willie's Lyke-Wake," in which a lovesick youth, well advised by a crafty parent, feigns death to bed and wed his beloved. (This beats dying of grief, like Barbara Allen's young admirer.⁷) The original text is too long for present purposes, so I have cut it. As for the tune, I have cut out a repeat and broken down some of the crotchets into shorter notes at the same pitch to make a better fit with the words.

The sections of McDonald's Preface in which he explains the principles upon which his Collection was compiled are remarkable. Lucy Broadwood, Cecil Sharp, or any of the great collectors of the first revival, could have been justifiably proud if they had written the same things more than a century later.

McDonald realised, as Bartok did, that "in the present state of musical notation little more than what may be called the elements or ground-work of an air can be conveyed by it." Nevertheless, within these constraints he did his best to hand down accurately what he and his brother had received from their source singers and musicians. He discusses rhythm, for example, with great sensitivity. The tunes that Joseph had collected, he explains, "are sung by the natives in a wild, artless and irregular manner." Joseph had tried to capture this in his notations by the use of unequal bar lengths. Patrick, however, "ventured to write out these pieces in equal bars" since in their original form the tunes "could not have been understood, except by those who had an opportunity

of hearing them sung or played by the natives." On the other hand, assisted by memories of his brother's renditions, "the publisher has... endeavoured to express, as nearly as he could, consistently with such measure, the style and manner in which (the airs) are sung." McDonald displays a similar concern for authenticity in his discussion of "appoggiaturas and grace notes" and in his advice on performance styles.

The collecting philosophy behind these comments, for the time in which it was expressed, is extraordinary. In England the first attempt to publish traditional music that had been accurately transcribed did not come until 1843, with John Broadwood's Songs of the Peasantry of the Weald of Surrey and Sussex.⁸ In Wales the breakthrough came in 1844 when Maria Jane Williams published her Ancient National Airs of Gwent and Morganwg.⁹ In Scotland Patrick McDonald anticipated both of these great pioneers by championing the principle of scientific collection sixty years earlier. "The publisher," he wrote, "...never thought his copy of an air accurate until, upon playing it from his notes, the finger acknowledged that it was, as nearly as he could judge, the very tune which he had sung. He did not conceive that he was authorised to alter or improve the pieces according to his own ideas." If only all those other collectors and publishers of Celtic music, so roundly and so justifiably condemned by Lucy Broadwood, had followed McDonald's excellent example.

In its day McDonald's book secured powerful support and patronage. "The Noblemen and Gentlemen who compose the Highland Society in London" ordered 60 copies, and the book is dedicated to them. In all there were well over 800 subscribers, not only from Scotland (the Highland Society of Glasgow bought 20 copies) but also from London, Bath, Oxford, Durham and numerous other places south of the border. McDonald's patrons included Duchesses, Earls, Knights and many more eminent persons. If only the friends of British traditional music were so numerous and so influential today. But, alas, McDonald's great legacy, like so much more of our musical tradition, now lies neglected and largely forgotten.

¹ This article was originally published in English Dance & Song in September 1999.

² Yet again I am indebted to Dr. Emily Lyle of the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh. This time she gave me

precise references to McDonald and his book, and put me in touch with the Scottish Music Information Centre, 1 Bowmont Gardens, Glasgow G12 9LR (Telephone 0141-334-6393). Thanks are also due to Alasdair Pettinger, the Centre's Information Officer, who carried out much of the research, and provided most of the references, upon which this article is based.

³ The quotation in the title is from Lucy Broadwood. See page 11 of the Summer 1999 edition of ED&S for the reference, and for further information. A facsimile reprint of McDonald's collection was published in 1973 by Norwood Editions of Norwood, PA, in the United States (ISBN 0-88305-410-8).

⁴ Thomson, Derick S. [ed] (1983) The Companion to Gaelic Scotland, page 169. See also Farmer, Henry (1947) A History of Music in Scotland, page 255. There are also passing references (for example on page 129) in Collinson, Francis (1966) The Traditional and National Music of Scotland.

⁵ These hymns are on pages 326, 370 and 118 respectively of The Sacred Harp, 1991 edition (Sacred Harp Publishing Company).

⁶ Chords have been added to both musical examples by Margaret Crosland. The sheet music is in .pdf (portable document file) format, and can be opened, read and printed off with Adobe's Acrobat Reader, available free from <http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html>

⁷ Kinsley, James (1982) The Oxford Book of Ballads, number 94.

⁸ All of the songs in John Broadwood's collection of 1843, together with others harvested later by his niece Lucy Broadwood, have been reprinted in Lewis Jones [ed.] (1995) Sweet Sussex [ISBN 0-9526363-0-1]. This is available at reasonable cost from Ferret Publications, 34 Maney Hill Road, Sutton Coldfield, West Midlands, B72 1JL (0121-354-9621).

⁹ A recent reprint of this collection was reviewed in the Summer 1999 edition of English Dance & Song.