

The traditional songs, poetry, and music of Scotland are as easy to recognize as they are difficult to define. Just as purple heather cannot describe the whole country, so with traditional arts: no simple description will fit. The fruits of diverse languages and aesthetic values, these traditions are rooted in strikingly different landscapes. Within this small country there are enormous contrasts. Culturally as well as geographically, Scotland could be divided into several (imaginary) areas [see map on page 70], each reflecting a distinct spirit of the Scottish people, their songs, poetry, and music.

Along with the Western Isles (the Outer Hebrides), the Highlands—Scotland's largest land mass and most sparsely populated area—is traditionally home to the Gaels, who make their living from “crofting” (working very small farms), fishing, weaving, whisky distilling, tourism, and, nowadays, computing. “*Ciamar a tha thu’n diugh?*” a neighbor enquires, in Scottish Gaelic, “How are you today?” The songs and music have evolved through history, from as early as the first century C.E., when Scotland and Ireland shared traditions about their heroes. These traditions remember the hero Cù Culainn, whose warriors were trained to fight by a formidable woman on the Isle of Skye. To this day, you can hear Gaelic songs of galleys plying the seas between Ireland and the Hebrides, harking back to the 3rd- and 4th-century wondrous adventures of Fionn MacCumhail, his poet son Ossian, grandson Oscar, and several centuries of seafarers who landed on those shores.

From the 12th to the mid-18th century, Gaelic songs and music reflected a society bound up in a hierarchical clan system. The word “clan” is from *clann*, Gaelic for “children,” and just as a father is responsible for the well-being within his family, so was the chief regarded within the clan. Mutual loyalty and protection were fundamental social values, and so were the hereditary rights to cultivate land and to fish.

The arts were highly valued in this society, and clan chiefs were the first patrons and sponsors of artists in Scotland. The retinue of the chief's household included the bard, piper, and harper, not to mention the armorer, a traditional craftsman highly skilled in metalwork and Celtic design, who created weaponry, tableware, and jewelry. The greatest artists of that era continue to influence Gaelic singers, poets, and musicians of today—pipers, for example, still play the compositions of the MacCrimmons (hereditary musicians to the MacLeods of Skye), while singers retain songs of the ancient bards.

When the clan system broke down after the Battle of Culloden (1746), there were enormous changes not only in Highland society but also in the traditional arts. The harp (*clarsach*), for example, virtually disappeared, though many harp tunes survived via the bagpipes. In 1931

MACCRIMMON'S LAMENT

Dh'iadh ceo nan stuc mu
aodainn Chuillionn,
Is sheinn a' bhean-shith a torman
mulaid,
Gorm shuilean ciùin san
Dùn a' sìleadh
On thriall thu uainn 's nach till
thu tuille.
Cha till, cha till, cha till
MacCriomain,
An cogadh no sìth cha till e
tuille;
Le airgiod no nì cha till
MacCriomain
Cha till e gu bràth gu Là na
Cruinne.

The mist swirled round the face
of Cuillin
And the banshee sang her
mournful lay,
Blue, gentle eyes in the Castle are
weeping
Since you departed and will
never return.
No more, no more, will
MacCrimmon return
Neither in war nor in peace
will he return again;
For neither silver nor any thing
will MacCrimmon return,
He will not return till the Day
of Judgement.

Edinburgh-based folklorist Margaret Bennett comes from a long line of traditional singers and pipers. A widely published scholar, she teaches at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, and at Orkney College. She also frequently performs at folk festivals.



Renowned Scottish fiddler Neil Gow (1727–1807), painted by Sir Henry Raeburn. Photo courtesy Scottish National Portrait Gallery

the founding of the Clarsach Society restored the use of the instrument, which, since the 1970s, has enjoyed a phenomenal revival.

In the very northern tip of Scotland, in the Orkneys and Shetland Islands, speech is akin to Nordic languages. People will tell you how the king of Norway gave the Shetland Islands to Scotland as part of his daughter's dowry and explain they have belonged to Scotland only for a little over four centuries. The livelihood here is based on crofting, fishing, knitting, whisky (in the Orkneys), and more recently, oil. There is also tourism, and when a friendly Shetlander asks you *"Fu ist dü?"* you can reply, "I'm fine, thank you."

Ancient ballads rooted in Scandinavia are part of song repertoires, though it is quite common for the same singers to launch into Victorian broadside-ballads and American Country and Western songs as well. Seafaring people bring back treasures from around the world, including songs and musical instruments. The fiddle is the main instrument in the Shetlands, and Shetlanders have been strong guardians of their fiddle traditions.

The boat from Shetland will take you to Aberdeen, where the surrounding countryside of the North-East farmlands contrasts with the neighboring Highlands. While the language is Doric—"Fit like the day?" is one greeting—place-names reflect an earlier era when Gaelic was spoken. The area is also

one of the strongholds of ancient Scots ballads, known as the "muckle (great) sangs," some of which have Norse connections. The North-East boasts

such singers as the late Jeannie Robertson, whose fabulous voice and phenomenal repertoire earned her worldwide reputation. Jeannie's people are Travellers, known for centuries all over Scotland as "tinkers" because of their skill as itinerant tinsmiths. Nowadays, the Travelling people are celebrated as custodians of Scotland's oral tradition.

Barley (for whisky) is the main crop on North-East farms, which, in the day of the horse, employed hundreds of laborers. The harsh lifestyle of bygone days is best remembered in song—with wit and humor they tell of this farmer or that ploy or escapade, or recall, with sentimental tears, some four-legged friend that brightened the daily toil, sing of a plowman's sweetheart, or praise a piece of farm machinery. Evenings in stone-built bunkhouses, known as "bothies," were spent in singing these "bothy songs" as well as ancient ballads, and in entertaining one another with tunes on the button melodeon (a relative of the accordion), mouth organ (harmonica), jew's harp, or fiddle, with the

THE GYPSY LADDIE

Three gypsies came tae oor
hall door,
And O but they sang
bonnie-O,
They sang sae sweet and sae
complete
That they stole the hairt of
a Lady-O.

—an excerpt of a ballad from
the North-East, as sung by
Jeannie Robertson

occasional dance in tackety (hobnail) boots. This way of life changed with increased mechanization on farms after World War II, and those who actually experienced it are now well up in years. The songs and music live on, however, especially at annual gatherings and folk festivals held all over Scotland.

The year 2002 saw the completion of a remarkable eight-volume collection of songs of the North-East, *The Greig-Duncan Folk Song Collection*. This was originally the work of a minister and a schoolmaster, and was first published in weekly newspapers between 1907 and 1911.

Collecting in the same area in

1951, Alan Lomax observed,

“What most impressed me was

the vigor of the Scots folksong

tradition, on the one hand, and its close connection with literary sources on the other. . . . The Scots have the liveliest folk tradition of the British Isles, but paradoxically, it is the most bookish.” No matter what the region, the Scots love their song books, and no area was better served in the 19th century than the Scottish Borders, home to Sir Walter Scott. When you travel south to the Borders and on to the counties of Dumfries and Galloway, you will see enormous tracts of land planted in conifers by the Forestry Commission in the 20th century. Nevertheless, these rolling hills are still home to Cheviot sheep raised on vast hill-farms, with isolated shepherd cottages bearing witness to the lives of the hardy, self-sufficient folk. In times past, the only entertainment the herders could look forward to was a Saturday night get-together with other herders, some of whom would walk miles to share a song or a tune.

Whether they live in the country or in any of the mill towns such as Hawick, Galashiels, and Melrose, home to weavers and wool workers, Border folk speak and sing in Broad Scots. The jewel of the Border song tradition is the impressive corpus of Border Ballads, most of which are rooted in a troubled history of disputes over land and family inheritances. The late folklorist Hamish Henderson once remarked that “Scotland . . . throughout its history has given much greater credence to its ballads than to its laws.” These ballads undoubtedly have kept alive not only ancient history, but also, at times, ancient grudges.

The town of Dumfries was once home to Robert Burns, who lived there from 1792 until his untimely death in 1796. There he composed some of his finest songs, such as “Ae Fond Kiss,” “Flow Gently Sweet Afton,” and his political squib, “Ye Jacobites By Name.” The plowman poet and song-maker born in a cottage in Ayrshire is now celebrated around the world, and his poems and songs are translated into many languages. In the closing years of his life, Burns also collected songs from all over Scotland and helped edit two major collections of traditional and revised song texts set to traditional tunes.

Traditional Scottish music sessions take place nightly in Sandy Bell’s pub, Edinburgh. Photo by Nancy Groce © Smithsonian Institution

A MAN’S A MAN FOR A’ THAT

Is there for honest poverty
That hings his head, an a’
that?

The coward slave, we pass
him by

We dare be poor for a’ that!

For a’ that, and a’ that,

Our toils obscure and a’ that

The rank is but the guinea’s
stamp,

The man’s the gowd for a’
that.

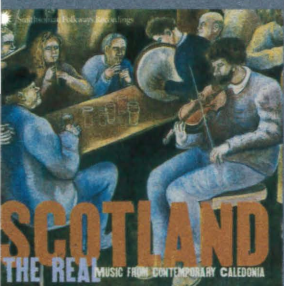
—Robert Burns

(sung at the opening of the
Scottish Parliament in 1999)



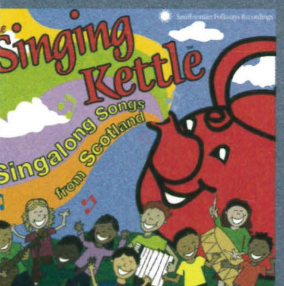
SCOTLAND ON SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS RECORDINGS

The Scottish music scene has never been more exciting. A new generation of singers, songwriters, composers, and musicians are adding their own voices and interpretations to a tradition that stretches back centuries. Their inspiration and creativity are reflected in a new compilation produced by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings especially for the 2003 Smithsonian Folklife Festival.



Scotland the Real: Music from Contemporary Caledonia (SFW CD 40511) offers 20 tracks selected by Fiona Ritchie, creator and host of National Public Radio's weekly

show "Thistle & Shamrock®," and Nancy Groce, folklorist and curator of the *Scotland at the Smithsonian* program. The recording spotlights marquis-name Scottish performers such as the Battlefield Band, Alasdair Fraser, the Tannahill Weavers, Fiddlers' Bid, Brian McNeill, the Wrigley Sisters, and Cilla Fisher, as well as equally talented artists who deserve to be better known to American audiences.



Cilla Fisher also appears with her husband Artie Trezise on an album of children's songs, *The Singing Kettle: Singalong Songs from Scotland* (SFW CD 45057). Favorite

songs for young people such as "Down on the Funny Farm" and "Five Wee Monkeys" will delight listeners of all ages.

Both albums are available for purchase at the Festival Marketplace and through the Smithsonian Folkways Recordings Web site, www.folkways.si.edu.

SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS RECORDINGS
Connecting People through Music

Returning north again to the Central Belt you will sense a myriad of cultural differences, especially in the cities of Edinburgh, Glasgow, Perth, and Dundee. Landscapes, skylines, and traditional industries are reflected in local songs and music. Glasgow, world famous for building ships such as the *Queen Elizabeth II*, also had an earlier tobacco trade with Virginia. Self-styled "tobacco lords" built huge mansions, in stark contrast to the overcrowded tenements of the masses. If surviving depends on a sense of humor, then Glasgow will flourish—the rapid-fire retort that gives comedian Billy Connolly his fame (or notoriety) is part of the Glasgow character, and the matchless wit of song-maker Adam McNaughtan sums up the Glaswegian. It's also true there that, regardless of your name, you might be asked, "How's it gaun, Jimmy?" Dundee, with its jute and jam and newspapers, has a more droll humor, as does Edinburgh. Though Scotland's capital is only 40 miles from Glasgow, there is a world of difference between the two cities.

Every August since 1946, the Edinburgh International Festival has been the world stage to every imaginable art form, from the most sophisticated classical ballet, opera, or orchestra to the seediest side-street show. In 1951, to offset its elitist bias, Hamish Henderson helped set up The People's Festival Céilidhs. The aim was to give a platform to traditional Scots singers such as Jeannie Robertson and Jimmy MacBeath, Gaelic singers Flora MacNeill and Kitty MacLeod, and piper Calum Johnston. So successful were these *ceilidhs* that they are often credited as sparking what became known as the

Folksong Revival, and Henderson is acknowledged as the father of the movement.

From the early 1960s, folk clubs were springing up all over Scotland, with rural festivals giving people a chance to enjoy weekends of music and song. Then, in the 1980s, a Hebridean priest, Father Colin MacInnes, piloted a *féis* on the Isle of Barra—a teaching festival where youngsters could learn traditional Gaelic songs, bagpipes, *clarsach* (harp), fiddle, and other instruments. It was a resounding success and triggered a movement that now extends all over Scotland, with hundreds of children becoming proficient in a range of instruments and songs.

Every January since 1993, Glasgow's Celtic Connections Festival has staged world-class folk music concerts that attract people from all over the world. Though the rural areas may have been incubators of folk songs and music for centuries, Glasgow has suddenly become center stage for a huge revival of traditional songs and music, along with newer sounds that borrow from other cultures.

Twenty-first-century Scotland enjoys the healthiest and liveliest "folk scene" imaginable. High schools offering academic concentrations in traditional music have been established in the Wester Ross town of Plockton, and in Edinburgh. The Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama in Glasgow also offers a college degree in Scottish traditional music. If the enthusiasm and performance standards among young generations of traditional singers and instrumentalists are anything to go by, then Scottish music and song are in safe hands. ■