

Foreword

THERE was once a Harper who, now and again, put into the various creeks of the Isles, and always in the dusk. He would spend the evening in the Headland House where the makers and the hearers of music were wont to meet, and at midnight he would pass the blessing round and put out to sea again, tune-seeking and tune-making. And the township children would ask their mothers, ‘When is the Harper coming back?’

Happy children of today ! Their mothers can now say to them, ‘The Harper is coming to stay with you.’

KENNETH MACLEOD

Edinburgh 1950

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Introduction

IT may be said of the songs of a people that they constitute in a very special way the heart-history of a people. From folk songs such as these we may glean that kind of knowledge of a people which does not find its way into ordinary history books. And this is understandable, for, through singing the songs of a people, we identify ourselves with those people; we share their joys and their sorrows, their hopes, aspirations, their ceremonials, their customs, their turns of thought and their turns of speech; we sit, so to speak, at their hearths and on their hillsides, and become one with them. In issuing this collection of songs for the use of school-children everywhere, we had this thought very much in mind.

Long years ago I heard a little girl singing a Highland Lullaby at a Winnipeg Festival. She sang it so sweetly and so natively that I was sure she must in herself be Highland. But she had never been near the Highlands. She was a wee girl whose parents were Poles, but she had in her that touch of nature which makes the whole world kin, and she had so identified herself with the spirit of the song that, for the time being, she was over the hills and far away in a place she had never seen, and amongst a people she had never met. 'In sweet music is such art.'

The Songs of the Isles are easily within the ken and compass of English-speaking children. There are very few dialect words; for the Gaels rarely mix their English with dialect, whatever they may do in their Gaelic. And the tunes are fresh and attractive, although they may be stodgy enough things when sung without a lilt, that is, without a sense (and presence) of rhythm.

It ought to be said that the songs are not all Island songs, that is, if we take 'Island' as meaning those strips and clumps of land which have been splintered from the mainland of Scotland by the

ceaseless wash of the Atlantic. As a matter of fact, we in Scotland are all, at one and the same time, islanders as well as mainlanders. It was a wee girl from Harris who, asked by a Glasgow school teacher—‘What is an island?’ replied shyly, ‘Skye be an island, but not Harris’. And it was an old Skye minister who was wont to invoke the blessing of the Deity on ‘the people of Skye, not forgetting the people of the adjacent islands of Great Britain and Ireland’. So, you see, wheresoever we live is the mainland, and yet we are all islanders.

The songs, however, are mostly connected with one or other of our Western Isles, and they are mostly chorus songs, for the Gael dearly loves to join in. Indeed, so fond of ‘joining in’ were the Gaels of old that most of their songs start (as well as finish) with a chorus, on the grounds perhaps that you cannot have too much of a good thing.

It was a Welsh poet who said—‘No matter where this body is, the mind is free to go elsewhere’. So, while you are singing the songs, be it where you will, in England or Ireland or Wales or America, or Canada or Australia or New Zealand, or in Timbuctoo for that matter, you can, by a flight of the imagination, transport yourself to Skye or Barra or Lewis or Harris or Tiree or Uist or Isla or Mull or Iona, or any other isle you care to choose. Or you can be ‘chasing the breeze’ amidst the white breakers of the Hebridean seas, a song on your lips, and ‘it’s good-bye to care’. The point is this, if you are right in the heart of your song, depend upon it you will sooner or later find yourself right in the heart of the place and the people whence the song came. That’s the idea! Not only is it the idea; it is the spirit in which these songs should be sung, indeed it is the spirit in which all songs which come from the hearts of the people should be sung.

HUGH S. ROBERTON

Glasgow, 1950

