



ONE COMMON THREAD

Ruth Lee Martin's recent interview with Scottish Gaelic singer Christine Primrose left her reflecting on the influence of Gaelic song and culture on Australian society

Above:
Bradley Cummings
The village of Staffin on the
Isle of Skye
February 2005
Photograph courtesy of Bradley
Cummings

Right:
Christine Primrose
Taken at the oral history
interview; Christine Primrose
interviewed by Ruth Lee Martin,
18 November 2005
Pictures Collection

The Oral History Collection of the National Library of Australia is a tantalising place for a musician. It holds endless hours of recordings of songs and forgotten voices, providing us, as Australians, with a tangible link to our somewhat patchwork, though entirely fascinating, musical heritage. The archive is extensive, covering a wide range of interviews with musicians and recorded music, from folk through to classical genres

Recently the traditional Scottish Gaelic singer, Christine Primrose, came to Canberra as part of her Australian tour of concerts and workshops, and I had the pleasure of interviewing her for the Library's Oral History Collection. Primrose's passion for traditional songs, her intimate understanding of their context, and her description of life growing up on a small island in the Outer Hebrides, made for a most interesting interview. The



connection between Australia and a Gaelic singer from the faraway town of Càrlabhaigh (Carloway) on the tiny island of Lewis seems, at first glance, to be somewhat tenuous, yet an important part of Australia's almost forgotten history lies in this very link.

The Scottish Gaelic Society of Victoria, which sponsored Primrose's visit, marked its centenary in 2005 with a *ceilidh* (concert and dance) organised in the Williamstown Town Hall and presided over

by Lewis-born Australian, Joan Mitchell-Willis. It is a remarkable achievement that the Scottish Gaelic Society of Victoria has been running for as long as 100 years, its roots reaching deep into the past. The *ceilidh* was a special event because it brought together groups and individuals from Victoria, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory, all with the common aim of promoting Scottish Gaelic culture through language and music. Primrose's singing was the musical highlight of the evening and, as she sang a set of unaccompanied Gaelic songs in her beautiful, clear voice, the emotion in the songs needed no translation. The large audience was transfixed.

The connection between the Gaelic-speaking Scots and the formation of the Australian identity and character is one that has been largely underestimated. The general misconception is that the Highlanders and Islanders of Scotland assimilated quickly into the Australian population, losing touch with their culture and language almost immediately. Yet this is not an accurate picture, as historian and scholar Dr Cliff Cumming has shown through his painstaking research of primary sources including diaries, letters and newspaper articles. Many of the letters sent back 'home' to Scotland were published in local newspapers. They described the way of life in Australia, sometimes in glowing terms but more often in terms of the incredible hardships endured in the search for a better life. The National Library of Australia holds copies of a Gaelic newspaper, *An Teachdaire Gaidhealach*, produced for a time in the mid-1800s, and then again in the 1980s. There are also records of Gaelic schools in Geelong and Ballarat. There still exist a few scattered songs in Gaelic expressing most poignantly the feelings of these migrants as they struggled to come to terms with life in this new land.

A sense of continuity, and a strong and vigorous connection with their Scottish culture and way of life, were important concepts to immigrant Gaels. Contrary to popular opinion, they did cling to their culture and language in the face of overwhelming odds. Although forming only a minority of the total population of immigrants in the 1800s, the Scots were a force to be reckoned with, and had a



significant impact upon the formation of Australian culture, politics and religion (see 'Scots Radicals in Port Phillip 1838–1851' written by Dr Cliff Cumming in 1991).

Gaelic continued to be used in the home, and worship in the church was frequently the centre of Gaelic community life. It is not commonly known that the last church service held in Gaelic in Geelong, Victoria was as late as 1953, and church services in Queensland continued into the 1940s. The outlet for the language continued in song, poetry and religion. As Cumming points out in his article, 'Scottish Identity in Australia', the mid-1800s heated debate about how to strike a delicate balance between maintaining their national character and community while embracing Australia and forging new ties, is still part of an

Bradley Cummings
Graveyard and chapel ruins on the
Island of Raasay
February 2005
Photograph courtesy of Bradley
Cummings

ongoing discussion today within the broader community.

Primrose comes from an unbroken tradition of immersion in Gaelic song. She understands deeply the ways in which music underpins the construction and maintenance of community. This Gaelic community now reaches far beyond the borders of the Hebrides or, indeed, Scotland, and much of Primrose's work is spent travelling to places such as America, Canada and, of course, Australia, teaching and giving workshops. Primrose also teaches traditional song at the Gaelic college, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. The Gaelic courses in music and language (some of which are by distance education) are growing at a phenomenal rate, offering a sense of belonging and meaning for, as Primrose puts it, people wanting to connect to 'something with genuine emotion'.

One of the primary modes of expression for the Gaels has been and, as Primrose shows, still is bound up with a vast body of song. The music of the Outer Hebrides is incredibly rich and diverse; singing is a central part of ordinary people's lives. In this oral culture, songs are the bearers of culture itself, providing a record of events that go back into the distant past. They are the carriers of cultural myths, heroic sagas, panegyrics (praise poems); they pass on the history of the clans and society and, of course, as part of the *ceòl mòr* (big music) tradition, they lament, mourn, and honour the dead. As part of the *ceòl beag* (small music) tradition, these songs are also the bearers of the ordinary, the everyday, and

include poignant love songs, rhythmic work songs and lively *puirt-a-beul* (music for dancing). These songs accompanied every facet of life and almost every task—rowing, reaping, milking, churning, and waulking home-spun cloth. Hard, demanding and often repetitive physical work was lightened by singing these songs.

However, it is in the laments that Primrose feels the link with humanity is at its strongest. The sincerity of the songs, the emotional outpouring of grief and the intensity of feeling in the face of death, is an experience in which our shared humanity is distilled. Christine comments:

In a way music connects with spirituality ... It's the one common thread we all have as human beings. Over the years people have come up to me, and they don't have Gaelic, but they say that my singing moved them to tears and they don't know why. That's an amazing thing to do. It shows you how powerful the songs can be, because they were born of genuine emotion. And if you as a singer can put that across ... people connect with that. They open themselves to it. They connect with that genuine emotion and the sincerity of it.

These traditional songs, whether full of sadness, lovesickness, longing, humour or wit, not only form a vital part of the culture of the Highlands but also play an important part in our cultural history as Australians. Songs provide a kind of cultural glue, maintaining a sense of community through shared experiences and shared memory. They bridge the present and the past, providing continuity that links us, as

Bradley Cummings
Across Loch Dunvegan toward
Duirinish, Isle of Skye
February 2005
Photograph courtesy of Bradley
Cummings





immigrant Australians, to our roots, and assist with the ongoing process of identity, both communal and individual. As a result, these songs assist communities in coping and dealing with the difficult process of change—whether that change is as dramatic as that of immigration, or the more subtle changes of everyday life.

These songs can give us a sense of wonder at the richness of the old Gaelic traditions and yet through contemporary arrangements they remain alive and relevant to the modern world. This is no easy balance: how to remain true to tradition and yet meaningfully adapt to the changing world? Here, too, Primrose has some food for thought:

There are problems of keeping the tradition at the centre of it all—of keeping the song at the centre, being the core of however you are going to arrange. It [the arrangement] should never get in the way of the actual song. I think that's really important. You can do that with *puirt-a-beul*, but laments, or deeply felt songs—songs that were born of tragedy—I think you've got

to be really careful what you do because of the sheer content of them and the circumstances under which they were written. All these songs are strong enough on their own.

The National Library's Oral History Collection provides a glimpse into a past that is entirely relevant to our present. Here the musician or scholar can dip into a treasure-trove of stored cultural memories. There is something enticing and immediate about the world of sound: of hearing voices speak in their own distinctive ways, of listening to old tunes played simply in an unadorned but powerful way, and knowing that kept within this place of sound there is indeed 'one common thread'.

DR RUTH LEE MARTIN is a musicologist, performer and composer with a special interest in Scots Gaelic song. She is a lecturer at the Australian National University and regularly performs Gaelic music with her band Eilean Mòr.

Top:
Bradley Cummings
Scalpay, seen from the Isle of Skye
February 2005
Photograph courtesy of Bradley Cummings

Above:
Bradley Cummings
Toward Beinn Dearg Mhòr,
Isle of Skye
February 2005
Photograph courtesy of Bradley Cummings