

Reviews

Shaw, John, ed. 2000. *Brigh an Òrain: A Story in Every Song*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press. 432 pp. ISBN 0-7735-2063-5

Focused on the Gaelic song tradition of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, and particularly on the life and repertoire of tradition-bearer Lauchie MacLellan, *Brigh an Òrain* is an extremely important addition to the literature on Scottish-Gaelic culture. Not only are 48 of Lauchie's songs transcribed into western notation along side their Gaelic lyrics and English translations, so are nine of his stories. John Shaw has also included a significant section documenting Gaelic singing and its context in Broad Cove Parish, where Lauchie resided.

Brigh an Òrain is the long-awaited sequel to Shaw's earlier edited work, *Tales Until Dawn/Sgeul Gu Latha* (1987), which features the stories of tradition-bearer Joe Neil MacNeil. John Shaw, whose Harvard PhD dissertation formed the backbone of *Tales Until Dawn*, is a senior lecturer in Scottish Ethnology at the University of Edinburgh. His involvement with the St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project (currently housed at St. Francis Xavier University) allowed him to make the substantial recordings of both Joe Neil MacNeil and Lauchie MacLellan which have become the bases of his books.

Brigh an Òrain will appeal to a number of different audiences. First, there is no doubt that this text will be important to Cape Bretoners. The original Gaelic text is available to those literate in Gaelic or studying the language, but the English translations ensure that the text is accessible to a wide audience, and assists Gaelic language learners to assess their understanding of the Gaelic content. Moreover, Gaelic singers in the community frequently check Gaelic song books in order to ensure that they have complete and correct verses: "Songbooks in Gaelic were highly valued possessions, and ... were regarded as important in communities as containing authoritative versions of songs" (35). It is unfortunate, however, that *Brigh an Òrain* does not provide an audio recording of the published songs, particularly given that most community members do not read musical notation.

Second, Shaw's book will appeal to folklorists, not only because of the inclusion of several folktales, but because detailed contextual information is provided regarding the Gaelic song and story traditions of Cape Breton. Although these traditions are strongly rooted in Scottish Gaelic traditions, descendants of 19th century Scottish immigrants have taken them in new directions. For example, Scottish waulking songs, which accompanied the beating of woven cloth in order to shrink it, were once only performed by women. In Cape Breton, the same tradition is known as "milling" and now involves men as well as women. In fact, although there is no longer any practical need to mill wool, milling frolics are still regularly held in Cape Breton as social events and as opportunities to speak Gaelic.

In and of themselves, songs are considered stories, recounting events that took place, or describing people in the community. The essence of the song, the *brigh an òrain*, lies in the meaning of the text. A singer must understand the story that the song is relating in order to render it properly. Songs also have lineages: singers recount who composed a particular song (if known), and from whom they learned it. It was therefore somewhat disappointing that Shaw chose not to provide such information along with the transcriptions. Shaw also chose to keep the contextual information distinct (Part I) from the actual songs and stories transcribed (Parts III and IV). Readers might have achieved a fuller understanding of Cape Breton Gaelic song culture if the contextual information had been integrated with the song transcriptions.

Finally, although John Shaw is primarily an ethnologist, his focus on song makes his book relevant to ethnomusicologists. There are numerous collections of Gaelic songs, but few texts detail the composition and transmission processes, local aesthetics, settings and venues, relationship between audience and performer, and the recent processes of change in any *Gaeltachd* (Gaelic-speaking region), let alone the small diasporic community of Cape Breton.

Shaw's focus on an individual is unusual in ethnomusicological literature. Shaw presents an overview of early- to mid-twentieth century Gaelic song culture in Cape Breton, but always starting from Lauchie's perspective. Shaw draws on other Gaelic consultants, but only as they support or develop Lauchie's statements. Such an approach provides the reader with a deep understanding of one Gaelic singer's experience of Gaelic song culture. Although I believe that Shaw's focus on an exceptional singer is appropriate, and although Shaw manages to paint a fairly comprehensive picture of Gaelic song culture in Cape Breton, concentration on an individual necessarily provides depth at the expense of breadth. It would be interesting to see future publications providing other and different individual perspectives: what about an average singer rather than an exceptional one? what about a young Gaelic learner as opposed to an elderly native speaker? what about a woman as opposed to a man?

Shaw's book is a very real contribution to ethnomusicological literature though it might have been further strengthened by utilizing more recent ethnomusicological sources instead of relying on older classics, such as Alan Merriam's *Anthropology of Music* (1964) and Ruth Finnegan's *Oral Poetry* (1977). Although both are seminal ethnomusicological texts, many more recent scholars have refined the theories and assertions expounded by those earlier authors. In particular, *Brigh an Òrain* might be strengthened and augmented by using theories of gender and music, as well as transnationalism. Ian McKay's *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* is also a notable absence from Shaw's bibliography. However, with a huge array of rich folklore and songs still unexplored and available to Shaw through the Folklore Project, there is ample room for such issues to be addressed in a future text.

There is no doubt that *Brìgh an Òrain* will be crucial to those who study Scots Gaelic traditions. Shaw's work is engaging and accessible, and will be an important addition to the libraries of folklorists and ethnomusicologists.

Heather Sparling