

*Review Essay:*  
**A Scot Collects Gaelic Songs in Canada**

MARGARET BENNETT

John L. Campbell. *Songs Remembered in Exile*. Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1990. 2 maps, 21 photos, bib., indexes, glossary. 284 pp. 30 pounds.

John Lorne Campbell of Canna is well known for his long, illustrious, two-fold career: in the conservation of nature and in the recording and preservation of Gaelic oral tradition. As an Oxford graduate in agriculture, he first visited Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, in 1932 and was struck by the vigour of the Gaelic language and culture in this part of Canada. Since the Official Canadian Linguistic Census had hitherto ignored Gaelic as a language, Campbell conducted his own "unofficial census" and deduced from it a conservative estimate of 50,000 native speakers of Gaelic in the Maritime Provinces.

The 1932 trip inspired his second, 1937 visit. He and his wife, folklorist Margaret Fay Shaw, returned to Cape Breton armed with a clockwork Ediphone recorder and a resolution to record on cylinder the old songs brought from Scotland by emigrants from Barra and South Uist, and to compare the Cape Breton versions with songs collected earlier that year on those same Scottish islands.

More than fifty years later (and a good many books in between), we can heartily welcome *Songs Remembered in Exile*, the product of these and additional visits, and several years of research besides.<sup>1</sup> Campbell begins with a short introduction, then gives his fieldwork notes of that first visit, transcribed almost verbatim from his diary. While the concise, almost hasty style of this section may raise questions (even eyebrows), these notes are a rare example of the value of the diary as a fieldwork technique, always strongly recommended, yet too often neglected by folklorists. Without such painstaking diligence at the close of each day, it is almost impossible to recreate at a later date the vividness that a diary can preserve:

Saturday April 16th. Frightful weather. Pouring rain etc. Afternoon mailed circulars re Gaelic to R.C. Priests of Cape Breton, 39 in all. Called at St. Francis Xavier College at 4:30 p.m. on Dr. Nicholson. Was kindly greeted and put up for the night and met with great hospitality. Six or seven of the teaching staff speak Gaelic, and Gaelic is taught twice a week.

Sunday, April 17th. At St. Francis Xavier College. Finished circulars, 151 in number, and still must look up the Continuing Presbyterians of Cape Breton and Nova Scotia ...

Monday April 18th. J. B. Isaac's bookstore in Antigonish contains many good Gaelic volumes ... (p. 30)

Campbell recounts his second visit in 1937 by republishing and updating an article he wrote for the Scots Magazine in 1938. From this point on, *Songs Remembered in Exile* gives the reader more time to reflect on the many topics presented throughout the book: the author's view of Cape Breton (he dispels the myth that the landscape resembled Scotland: "it is almost the exact antithesis"); the historical background to the migration, with a moving portrayal of the harsh realities left behind; the challenging conditions of the New World; and above all, the feelings of nostalgia and longing which are reflected in the songs themselves:

Cape Breton appears to a Highland visitor as a land of strange incongruities: a country where one can hear the Gaelic of Lewis, Skye or Barra against a seemingly most inappropriate background of dense spruce forest; a Highland community where there are no lairds; where the descendants of settlers from Skye live beside Micmac Indians, aboriginal inhabitants of the Maritime Provinces; where the people still refer to themselves as 'Lewismen,' 'Skyemen,' 'Uistmen,' 'Barramen,' and so on, although none of them have ever seen these places; where many can describe perfectly, through their grandparents' reminiscing, places in the "Old Country" which they have never seen. Where, in fact, an inherited nostalgia and old habits and customs have survived in a most astonishing way. (p. 38)

From the original recordings of 95 songs, Campbell selected 60 "musical items" for publication: 59 traditional songs and an Ossianic ballad. The section titled "The Singers and Their Songs" (pp. 77-260) provides the book's main focus. Its sub-sections give concise biographical accounts of the 12 tradition bearers followed by their songs, with as many as 20 from a single singer. English translations are by the author, and musical transcriptions mostly by Seamus Ennis of the Irish Folklore Commission.

Campbell's scholarly annotations provide invaluable explanations for many of the motifs in the texts; he also makes comparisons with Scottish versions. Reflecting his original aims, approximately two-thirds of the songs are from singers of Barra or Uist descent, and are those that survived the emigration; these songs do not, therefore, deal with New World themes.

Many of the songs have survived from the sixteenth century, having already been in oral tradition for two hundred years before their singers emigrated. *Songs Remembered in Exile* is a marvelous testimony to the strength of Gaelic oral tradition, and to the enthusiasm, sensitivity, and far-sightedness of John L. Campbell's dedicated scholarship.

**NOTE**

1. A copy of the songs discussed in this essay is in the Library of Congress Archive of Folk Songs in a bound positive photostat, described as follows: A selection of Folk-Songs and Music made in Nova Scotia by John Lorne Campbell of Canna, Scotland, in 1937, together with songs and music collected by him and his wife, Mrs Fay Shaw Campbell, in the Outer Isles of Scotland, all of which was transcribed by Seamus Ennis of the Irish Folklore Commission during the period Nov. 1944–Mar. 1947, from the original Presto Gramophone recordings and from Ediphone Cylinders in the Island of Canna.

The original Ms. is in the possession of the Irish Folklore Commission, Dublin.  
*S. O. Duilearga, 3rd. June 1947.*