

'The Swing, the Spirit and Savagery': Marjory Kennedy-Fraser's Celticizing of Hebridean Music

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Marjory Kennedy-Fraser's *Songs of the Hebrides* (1909) is among the earliest song collections to directly identify with a particular locality rather than more generally with Scotland, the Borders, or the 'Highlands and Islands'. There is a curious audacity to the collection. Like Cecil Sharp, Kennedy-Fraser appears to be emulating the folkloristic best practices of her day; her ambition, she explains is 'to collect [songs] zealously in every corner (preferably with the phonograph) that we may save what is fast dying out' (p. xvi). Yet, also like Sharp, she declares that '[t]he aim in collecting, noting, and harmonising these airs was æsthetic rather than theoretic' and that songs were 'chosen for their beauty' (p. xxviii). That aesthetic appears to be largely a Romantic Celticizing of the music. Her volume introductions are peppered with literary references; Kennedy-Fraser quotes Wordsworth and Wagner at length, cites Matthew Arnold, nods to Yeats, and positions her work alongside Scott, Hogg, and Stevenson.

The proposed paper will suggest that this inherent contradiction of cultural preservation and aesthetic curation is not simply well-meaning ineptitude, but central to Kennedy-Fraser's musical and literary project. By collecting Hebridean traditional songs for a public whose taste in Celtic music was *The Immortal Hour* (1900, 1914), she asserted her importance within Western music while endeavouring to remain distinct from it. Kennedy-Fraser attempts for the Hebrides what Yeats had attempted for Ireland, reimagining an artistic tradition to establish the cultural and geopolitical significance of a particular, local, marginalized peoples and places; she urges her readers to learn Gaelic, claims that most traditional songs were written by women, and offers sensitive, personal descriptions of her informants. With her amalgamation of folklore, music theory, and travelogue, Kennedy-Fraser creates a literary expression of longing for an imagined Celtic past in which women and musicians like herself were revered.

Bio:

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