

01 FEB 2005

FOLK CULTURE IN SCOTLAND : A Paper for the CULTURAL COMMISSION ✓

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FOLK CULTURE AND ITS VALUE TO THE SCOTTISH COMMUNITY

The very term "folk" has attained the distinction of becoming one of the most ambiguous labels in the English language during the past few decades. Like the words "Celtic" and "organic" its usefulness in selling a product reveals little of that product's actual nature. So a selection of CD's slotted under the heading "Folk" may very well range from 1960's American pop music to Glasgow-based rock groups, fashioned on American role-models but distinguishable from mainstream rock music only by their use of an acoustic guitar and relatively discernable lyrics. Yet a person may search in vain throughout the groups on offer for anything which expresses the musical culture of any community which subsists primarily through the production of foodstuffs.

To the continental European mind, however, the term "folk" still bears a meaning with nuances quite distinct from "popular". The latter word, of Latin origin, speaks of music emanating from a primarily urban, and hence commercially motivated, society. "Folk" music, on the other hand, owes its creation to the expression of communities whose culture is deeply rooted and ultimately subservient to the natural environment, landscape, climate, contours, soil and accessibility in which it is located. The word "folk", itself of Germanic origin, is quite frequently compounded with the word "lore" in many European languages. This creates confusion in the minds of English-speakers unfamiliar with the pan-European custom of referring to various cultural phenomena as "folkloric"; for the word "lore" in English implies an oral literature and has nothing whatever to do with dance or handicrafts. Rightly or wrongly, there has been a movement throughout the European continent, and even Latin America, which has observed and embraced the cultural practices of rural communities and enlisted the compound "folkloric" to describe the holistic spectrum of interdependent customs which are natural to these communities. During much the same period, the Anglo-American world has retained the word "lore" in its original sense while wearing the word "folk" as a garment for the least valued of tasks until it has been consigned to the status of a dust-rag; whether this fragment was once a shirt or a pillow case is no longer apparent or important.

But, whether we humble our triumphantly powerful language by accepting "folkloric" as an adjective capable of encompassing such a vast range of artistic practices as a European might, it cannot be without value for us to reassess our attitudes towards what the European means by "folkloric", if only for the sake of improving communications with our European counterparts. In the context of Scottish Culture, we also have an opportunity to rediscover cultural treasures which are often neglected within a specifically Anglo-American infrastructure. Whatever the international usage of such terminology, our own national languages - Gaelic and Scots; yes, and Cant and Norn - have played a vital and distinctive role in the formation of the cultural matrix. Speakers of these languages know what is their own.

DISTINCTION BETWEEN FASHION-BASED ART AND CULTURE-BASED ART

One of the first issues that comes to mind in drawing a line between "popular" culture and "folk" culture is that the former is fuelled and almost tyrannically ruled by fashion; the latter appears almost whimsically resistant to fashion. Indeed, to read through the many papers which have been produced by Scotland's various bodies in charge of Arts, the aims declared for the

promotion of "traditional" arts read like the pontifications of a body of colonial cultural missionaries whose primary function is to enlighten the backward souls of the practitioners of traditional music and dance with the universal truth of fashion, as if the recalcitrant "folkies" were hopelessly resistant to fashion out of ignorance or stubbornness. This in face of the obvious fact that there is no dark corner left in all of Scotland which is not exposed to the glaring light of commercially motivated fashion, while there are vast stretches of the country and its society wherein genuine folk-culture can be shown to have been driven to virtual extinction by the overwhelming force of the mass-media. While journalists and arts administrators rale openly and vociferously about the need to rid Scotland of its "tartan and heather" image, they have failed to acknowledge the sorry irony that a group of children brought up within sight of heather-clad hills (and where else in the world are there such hills? Visitors travel across the globe just to see these for themselves) are more familiar with the landscapes of suburban Australia and the styles of Los Angeles than with the simple plant which causes those marginally distant hills to turn purple every August and with the nature of that woollen fabric which so typified their forbears.

Fashion by its very nature is temporary. Fashion which is not new is dated. Its shelf-life is contrived to be short-lived. Therefore its value to the well-being to the community is negligible. Fashion will prevail, with or without the assistance and despite efforts to the contrary, of any number of politicians or administrators. Therefore it might seem curious that so many papers released and projects initiated by our national arts institutions seem to focus so fixedly upon methods to ensure that traditional arts must be made "accessible" by bending them into shapes to accommodate prevailing fashion.

Culture, as opposed to fashion, stubbornly keeps a firm grip on its experiences and perpetually re-examines its own history. This can be carelessly interpreted as a fixation with the Past and a corresponding fear of the Future. But that is indeed a careless misinterpretation of the value of culture; for just as Fashion must change frequently and rapidly to have any validity whatsoever, it is vital for Culture to retain a constant and conscious awareness of its own history in order to have any future at all. A living folk-culture does change, of course, and it responds to Fashion by degrees. But it does this cautiously, because it understands instinctively that a beast which is so constantly changing and fluctuating as Fashion must be observed with caution and only followed at a safe distance, always with a critical eye.

The reality of this analogy in the context of Scotland's traditional culture can be illustrated clearly by observing what might be termed the "Brigadoon" example. It was in the 1950's that the American musical "Brigadoon" filled the theatres of the Western World in succession with other topical musicals such as "Oklahoma" and "South Pacific". In retrospect, all of these are seen as saccharin and superficial misrepresentations of the communities in which they were set. We look back disdainfully on the absurdity of the lad in Brigadoon clad in synthetically-coloured tartan singing, "I'll go home with Bonny Jean," just as we wince at the buxom Polynesian matron who chirps "Happy Talk". We acknowledge that these musicals are more the produce of American 1950's fashions, misconceptions and even prejudices than they are the manifestations of Scottish or Polynesian cultures.

But, if we look further back into the history of musical theatre we see the ballet "La Sylphide" and Donizetti's opera, "Lucia di Lammermoor", both of which, although set in Scotland, reveal little more than a thin, patently synthetic Scottish veneer. Since Brigadoon, there have been many other "Scottish" themed productions for stage, screen and recording studio, most of which can be understood to be more genuinely representative of their countries of origin and the fashions

of their time than of Scotland's cultural heritage. But this now obvious anomaly was rarely expressed at the time. At the time of each of these productions, they were touted as being more accessible to the public at large by their fashionable nature, as being of service to Scottish culture by contributing to its popularisation, of bringing a freshly contemporary format to a culture which is sluggish in its resistance to contemporary fashion. In other words, "Brigadoon" was promoted and hailed - even in Scotland - in the same terms as had been "La Sylphide" before it and with the same justification as were "The White Heather Club", "Thingamyjig" (both Scottish-made products of an era when the fashion was still in favour of the saccharin), "Highlander", "Braveheart" (both made in a reactionary fashion for the opposite extreme of inauthenticity) and now for the bulk of the items featured at festivals such as "Celtic Connections". The ethos at the heart of fashion is its newness and thus once it is no longer new it is embarrassingly dated and must expire in the smug face of the new fashion. Fashion-based art, although economically vibrant and unstoppable in its momentum, cannot sustain itself, let alone a society. Art which is culture-based may appear perpetually dated to a mind formed by fashion, but it has an endurance which is of enormous value in itself and the entire community can always draw upon the depth and integrity of its collected wisdom.

Here a parallel to foodstuffs comes to mind. Among the assorted flavours of crisps produced in Scotland today is Haggis Flavour. It is a cleverly successful marketing ploy and no doubt a delightful taste-sensation. But it gives only a brief and superficial experience of the substance and texture of haggis; relative to a portion of haggis, the nutritional value of a packet of crisps is negligible, whatever its flavour. Indeed, the range of ingredients that make up curry-flavoured pot-noodles is over 90% identical to those in the chop-suey flavour. So it might be instructive for us to observe when the line-up in a programme of Scottish "Traditional" music is much the same as the last month's jazz-programme.

FRAGMENTATION OF THE INTEGRAL FACETS OF FOLK CULTURE AND THE NEED FOR A HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVE

Institutions devoted to the promotion of Arts and Artists have been a major factor in Scotland's cultural life for many decades and are currently at the forefront of developmental plans. But it took many years - nearly an entire generation - of campaigning by traditional artists and their supporters before even the Scottish Arts Council consented to include any form of Traditional Arts within their remit. And the procrastination with which they accepted such belated arts into their domain was tantamount to a national tragedy; so much was lost while time and funding was diverted to endless conferences and discussions as to how the existing infrastructures might accommodate aspects of Music and Dance which were, until then, dismissed as quaint and even foreign. But the greatest error of all was in dealing with traditional Music, Dance, Storytelling and Crafts as unrelated entities. Thus the Dance Department, for example, perceived traditional Dance as simply another dance-form among many which they championed more enthusiastically and for which they already catered. Likewise the Music Department ultimately accepted traditional music as an element which could provide a ready source of material to professionals in the field of music. The initial results were strikingly similar in their nature to the haggis-flavoured crisp; the compositions carried on the continuum in which "Lucia di Lammermoor", "Brigadoon" and "Thingamyjig" thrived. Folked-up pop-music was more likely to receive funding than any project which aimed to present traditional music within its own context, trusting its own ethos and nuances as sufficient to justify its value.

Would the Scottish Executive countenance a Scotland wherein haggis is no longer available for

public consumption except as a flavoured crisp? Is whisky only to be valued as a flavouring for fudge? While the government would not dare to suppress the sales of crisps, it has made strenuous efforts to promote simple vegetables as more nutritious, if less sensational to the palate. Without condemning the trend for folk-flavoured fashionable music, it might be worthwhile for the Cultural section of the government to seek out means to sustain folk-culture. After all, if this is a well from which fashion-based arts may repeatedly draw, it must be important that the well is always full and reasonably clear.

The interrelationship among music, dance, lore, customs and crafts within Folk-Culture is vital to its meaning. It is noticeable that organisations devoted to the various traditional arts rarely if ever co-operate or even communicate with one another. Thus the Scottish Traditions of Dance Trust (which has never sought to have a traditional-culture specialist or even a Gaelic-speaker among its ranks) is left with many strange puzzles about the nature of such important elements to its remit as the meaning of the "Highland" dances it promotes or the anomaly that dances originally specific to Highland men are now confined to a technique devised for and virtually exclusive to girls. Had they regular access to the knowledge of the Gaelic folklorist, to the piping and fiddling aficionados, to the practitioners of old Highland crafts, these would not be illusive shadows in their domain of interest.

The European concept of "Folklore" assumes that one cannot truly understand folk-music without a deep familiarity with folk-dance, with folk-customs, with tales, crafts and all of the other aspects of the culture of a community based in a rural environment as was the norm even here in Scotland throughout the centuries when our own folk-culture thrived. While it is true that we are now an overwhelmingly urbanised society and media-fixated, even in our dwindling rural communities, yet there is still much to treasure in the culture which grew here in accordance with the natural terrain, just as we have learned to value the natural eco-systems which were nearly wiped out by commercially motivated forestry-plantation.

The authenticity of Folk Culture is manifest inasmuch as there is never a shadow of doubt as to the nature of the natural environment within which it thrived. At a festival displaying international folklore, it is obvious to the casual onlooker whether a folk ensemble comes from a tropical island or from a steppe-land. A troupe of "Highland" dancers or of Scottish country dancers convey little of Scotland's unique terrain and climate; this shows how far they have already strayed from their roots.

THE INCLUSIVE NATURE OF FOLK CULTURE

From a purely practical standpoint, the value of genuine folk-culture is manifest in its inclusiveness. In a short paper such as this, it might suffice to point out one simple example of this. In the case of traditional dance, for instance, the current types promoted are fairly clearly divided into those styles which are social and those which are primarily for performance or competition. But the lack of access to the cultural matrix has resulted in an ignorance of a more basic technique of dancing, upon which the others were based, which is far more accessible and community-based than anything within the projects promulgated by any subsidised traditional dance organisation. The nature of the performance/competition dance has drawn so heavily upon dance-schools and ballet techniques, that it has become virtually exclusive to young females or to young males with an unusually pliable set of joints in their legs. The only type of social dances

now promoted are exclusive to male/female couples. And yet, while social inclusion is high on the agenda of Arts promotion, the older formats of folk dance which were possible for any number of participants, of any size or age, and which involved the entire group and related to the songs and stories of the community's culture are absent from the awareness of the organisations subsidised to promote traditional dance.

Within the society which nurtured Scotland's own folk-culture, annual festivals were paramount in the collective minds of those who practised traditional activities. So certain songs, tunes, dances and stories related to Halloween, others to *Lunasdail*; there was a wealth of interrelated tales, songs and dramatic dances associated with Michaelmas and the celebration of this date was very widespread. There were even special festive bannocks to make. As the media has gradually washed these from our collective memory with an Anglo-American concept of annual holidays, we are left with little more than Christmas, New Year and Bank Holidays. Christmas, although promoted with a fervour which makes it impossible for anyone to escape, is a time for the nuclear families to reinforce their bonds by isolating themselves from non-family members; New Year in many Scottish communities has become focused on clubs and associations with restricted membership. Yet a greater proportion of our population than ever before is single, living alone and unassociated. Therefore, these holidays reinforce their social isolation by ritualising their exclusion. The older holiday customs were manifestly inclusive of the entire community and were the opportunity for ritualising the importance of friends and neighbours; the theme of including outsiders within the family at Michaelmas is prevalent within the Scottish storytelling tradition.

THE NEED TO ADDRESS A CROSS-SECTION OF AGE-GROUPS

There have been numerous projects over the past decade specifically devised to encourage traditional music and dance among the young. The Gaelic revival through playgroups and primary schools has grown at an astonishing rate. However, the long-term success of these has been questioned as the children involved in these endeavours have matured and largely abandoned the customs and language they were taught in their infancy. Herein many European models might provide us with more successful methods. Hungary and Slovakia, for example, managed to revive and sustain remarkably authentic customs of folk-dance and music by teaching them, not to infants, but to adolescents. This is a sensible practice for two very obvious reasons: First, nature of the customs themselves. The character and movement of the dancing was best suited to a relatively mature youth, developed to the stage where distinct differences between a male and female body inform the natural movements. Although this was also very much the case with Scottish traditional dance, it has already been reduced to a sort of unisex technique, certainly more suited to a child or a young female. The masculine technique has become virtually extinct by the process of women teaching children. Second, as any educationalist knows, infants respond to direct teaching from adults; those who have reached the verge of puberty rely on role models who have already attained adolescence and shun that which they perceive as infantile. So, while traditional dance projects in Scotland have been almost entirely restricted to primary pupils, those of Hungary and Slovakia began the process of revitalisation with smaller groups of participants selected from adolescents who showed a committed interest. The results were an astonishing success and the traditions quickly regained popularity in an enduring form.

Similarly, children who learn Gaelic in a play-group or primary school setting are certain to identify the language with infancy throughout their lives unless they observe its use among young adults. The revival of Macedonian as a language was conducted by using high-profile speakers between the ages of 15 and 25 to inspire children to follow their example. The success was

astonishing and it became the national standard within one generation.

INTERNATIONAL EUROPEAN INFRASTRUCTURES SUPPORTIVE OF FOLK CULTURE

Although these fluctuate as the European Community develops and expands, it is worth mentioning that Continental Europe has co-ordinated many of its activities in Folk-Culture for several decades and that the UK as a whole largely ignored this process. The most wide-ranging organisation was the French-based C. I. O. F. F. (Conseil des Organisations de Festivals Folkloriques) which has become an official committee of UNESCO (United Nations Educational and Cultural Organisation). Their publications and guidelines are readily available and could be particularly useful to Scottish activities and international links.

EUROPEAN AND OTHER ROLE MODELS APPLICABLE TO SCOTLAND

As early as the 1930's there was considerable development in the identification of Folk-Culture, its study and promotion throughout Europe. At the forefront of this was Hungary, especially through the studies and recommendations of Zoltan Kodaly. His works have been available in English but largely ignored here (with the notable exception of the Rudolf Steiner schools). The Hungarian models were followed by many other countries and by the 1950's the promotion of Folk-Culture was fairly universal throughout Europe and also Latin America; much of Canada and parts of the USA followed suit and international activities were a major factor by the 1960's. Scotland, with its exceptionally rich folk-heritage, did not participate in these programmes.

It would certainly be extremely useful for us to send delegates and invite visitors to provide our community workers with examples which are applicable to our own customs. The parallels are very strong indeed and cannot but help to enrich our vision of Scottish Folk-Culture.

Whereas "Folk" or "Celtic" festivals in Scotland feature talented individuals and groups (based on the structure and conventions of the pop-group), the European equivalent often features communities. For example, the Bulgarian festival of Koprivshtitse will have a programme which announces that at 4 pm on platform B there will be a presentation of the folk-culture (songs, dances, music, etc.) of the village of Shiroka Luka and that this will be followed at 5 by a group from the valley of the Cherna Reka. The equivalent in Scotland at - say - Killin, will present soloists and groups who represent themselves, not their community or indeed their culture. It is, of course, possible to have both, even at the same festival as often occurs in Bulgaria. But in Scotland it is quite unheard of for a group of performers to represent their community and display the spectrum of characteristics which evolved within its lore.

It is really too late to conceive of such representations as possible within Scotland, but it would have been not so very long ago. So at least the idea of community representation might permeate our concept of Folk Culture. What we do have, among our other assets, is a rich cross-section of more recent settlement from other cultural communities such as Poland and Kurdistan. Those communities have the potential to practice and display their cultural heritage here in exile and in some cases have already begun this as a practice. Studies have demonstrated that people who are at ease with their own culture are more accepting and understanding of other people's culture. Further, that a deeply rooted Folk Culture provides a welcoming context within which an immigrant might integrate into their new community.

BALANCING FOLK CULTURE WITH CONTEMPORARY AND COMMERCIAL ARTS

Festivals and platforms which feature Scotland's Traditional Arts are unquestionably successful in promoting Scotland abroad and inspiring our residents to enjoy and play an active role in the culture which is one of our most valuable national assets. But the focus on commercial success through conscious updating of the specific artforms can become overwhelming and overshadow the deeper, less trendy aspects of the cultural matrix. As practitioners of these aspects cannot rely upon the market for their sustenance it is vital that their work be regarded as worthy of support from the public, just as is the upkeep of historic buildings or the preservation of our material art treasures. In particular, it might be noted that Scotland's Travelling Community has preserved and maintained a priceless heritage of Folk-Culture. We owe it to that community to assist them in continuing to uphold these traditions at a time when their very way of life is under serious threat.

While it is important to display a contemporary image of Scottish Folk-Culture in the major showcases which receive public subsidy, an authentic living Folk-Culture exists in less prominent parts of society and on a much smaller scale. Therefore, it is necessary to identify these places where there is still a cultural eco-system upon which to build.

SELECTION OF PRACTITIONERS AND METHODS OF REVITALISATION

It stands to reason that the most effective practitioners must be at home within such a community. Someone actually brought up within the community and already known would be the ideal. Since Folk-Culture is no longer a widespread part of life in Scotland, those most suited to its revitalisation would themselves be exceptions to the norm. This must be taken into account by the selection process. When the first initiatives in traditional music and dance were undertaken in the 1990's, the application forms for interview were identical to those issued to applicants for conventional council jobs. The questions focused upon previous employment and salaries; even demanding the applicant already possesses a car. As a consequence, those who had actually previously worked within the field were eliminated without interview; there had never before been a salary available to work in traditional dance or music. Thus we experienced the odd situation where the most able and experienced specialists were cast aside in favour of might be termed "affluent amateurs". This is a serious error which must be corrected in future; success in the arts cannot be determined by a form which demands record of wages in a field which has previously been entirely freelance.