

1-1-1991

A Reconsideration of the Gillies Collection of Gaelic Poetry

Charles Coventry

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Coventry, Charles (1991) "A Reconsideration of the Gillies Collection of Gaelic Poetry," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 26: Iss. 1. Available at: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol26/iss1/15>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact SCHOLARC@mailbox.sc.edu.

Charles Coventry

A Reconsideration of the Gillies Collection of Gaelic Poetry

John Gillies' anthology of 1786 is the second general printed collection of Scottish Gaelic poetry, the first being Ranald MacDonald's *Eigg Collection* of 1776.¹ Who was this John Gillies?

John Gillies is known to have been working as a bookbinder in Glasgow in 1774.² His brother James stayed there as a bookseller, and both appear to have been associated with the printers J and J Robertson in the Saltmarket. John arrived in Perth in 1774, setting up as a bookseller in property on the south side of the High Street granted to him by John Robertson, tenant of Bankfoot, who may or may not have been related to the Glasgow printers.³ Gillies married Catherine Hood, who died in 1822.⁴ He began publishing from 1774 and was bookseller to the newly-founded Literary and Antiquarian Society of Perth. His output consisted of Scottish books with a gradual move towards Gaelic works, and by the 1780s it was all Gaelic.⁵

¹Donald MacLean, *Typographia Scoto-Gadelica or Books printed in the Gaelic of Scotland from the Year 1567 to the Year 1914* (Edinburgh, 1915; rptd. Shannon, 1972).

²Records of the Guildry Incorporation of Glasgow (Strathclyde Regional Council).

³Register of Deeds (Perth and Kinross District Library, Archives).

⁴Register of Deaths, Perth (Perth and Kinross District Archives).

⁵Robert Hay Carnie, *Publishing in Perth before 1807* (Dundee, 1960).

SEAN DAIN,

AGUS

ORAIN GHAIÐHEALACH,

DO REIR ORDU' DHAOIN UAISLE,

A RAID AN

GAELTACHD ALBA,

DON FHEAR FHOILLSICHEADH

E O I N G I L L I E S.

BALL CO-FHREAGARRACH DON

'T SEAN CHUIDEACHD ALBANNACH
ANN DUNEIDINN,

AGUS

COMPANACH DO N T' SEAN CHUIDEACHD AM
PEAIRT,

AGUS

LEABHAR REICEADAIR DO N' CHUIDEACHD
CHEUDNA.

CLO-BHUAILT' AM PEAIRT.

M, DCC, LXXXVI.

There are two major differences in emphasis between Gillies's anthology and *Eigg*. In the earlier collection there is only one example of an Ossianic poem, the pseudo-Ossianic nostalgic poem "Miann a" Bhàird Aosda," or "The Old Bard's Wish." "Ossianic" verse is that supposedly composed by the legendary Ossian, son of Fionn Mac Cumhail, and created in the eighteenth century in an attempt to reconstruct a lost Scottish national "epic," the equivalent of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.⁶ Gillies, however, makes the heroic ballads his second largest group. "Ballads" in Gaelic tradition are songs about the legendary heroes, and may be narrative or descriptive. While aware of the interest in the pseudo-Ossianic works derived from James Macpherson and from the school of John Smith of Campbeltown and John Macintyre of Glenorchy, he concentrates on providing versions of the classical ballads and of the later imitations within the tradition. Two of the classical ballads, "Duan Fraoich" (The Lay of Fraoch), and "Bàs Dhiarmuid" (The Death of Diarmaid), have Perthshire settings. There are Viking ballads, notably "Còmhrag Fheinn agus Mhanuis," (The Fight of Fionn and Manus), and "Teanntach mhór na Feinne," (The great struggle of the Feinn), which has the theme of the Last Great Battle and includes the Banner stanzas in which the banners of the Feinn (the warrior bands led by such heroes as Fionn Mac Cumhail), are described.⁷

The other important difference between Gillies's collection and *Eigg* is in the choice of love songs. In the earlier collection these are all aristocratic in ambience, but Gillies starts to expand the range with an interest in the more popular folk songs, and gives the first printed versions of several songs which are still familiar at ceilidhs or in the repertoire of traditional singers. Examples are "Oran Irteach," known in English as "The St Kilda Bird Song," composed by a young woman about a man hunting seabirds on the cliffs of the island of St Kilda, or "Oran le òigh d' a leannan, a bha 'n cunnart a treigeadh," a song of betrayal, a version of which is currently sung by Flora MacNeill of Barra.⁸ He is standardizing the texts of these songs, producing the "best" version in some cases from a number of manuscripts.

Popular folk songs are mostly anonymous, but Gillies has an interest in the works of known authors also. He has songs by John MacDonald of Kep

⁶Derick Thomson, "Bogus Gaelic Literature," *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Glasgow*, 5 (1958), 172-9.

⁷Donald E. Meek, "The Gaelic Ballads of Medieval Scotland," *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 55 (1989), 47-62.

⁸Sound recording: "Craobh nan ubhal." *CTP 002*, from Temple Records, Shillinghill, Temple, Midlothian.

Tarraing spàinneach làidir lìobhar
Sgoilteadh díreach cinn gu brógan.

Bhuidheann fhuilteach glan nan geur lann,
Thigeadh Reifimeid nan Leodach,
Thigeadh Réifimeid nan Niallach
Le loingear lionar 's le feòltaibh,
Foirbifich 's Frifealaich dhéireadh,
'S thigeadh Clann Reubhair 'an ordu.
'Nar a dhùisgeadh fir na h-Iuraich,
Co thigeadh air tùs ach Tomas ?

Fraoch.

THE scene of the following poem is said to have been on the south shore, and on the Island near the south side of Loch-Cuaich, or Lochfraochy about two miles to the westward of Amalrie and eleven west from Dunkeld. About a quarter of a mile to the S. E. there is, on an eminence, a very ancient ruin, which has probably been the seat of May, and nearly the station of the Bard too, when he said, *Ann san Iraidh tha siar fui dheas*, i. e. nigh the shore to the west-ward on the south. May was in love with Fraoch; but her daughter (who by some is called *Ceann-geal*, or White-head,) and Fraoch mutually loved each other, and because the mother found that he preferred her daughter to herself, she contrived and effected his ruin in the manner related in the Poem.

Duan Fraoich.

OSNA Caraid an cluain Fhraoich.
Mar ofna Laoich an caisteal Chro;
An ofna fin o 'n tuirfeach fear:
'S o'n trom ghulanach; bean og.

Sud e siar an carn am bheil;
Fraoch Mac Feadhaich, an fhuilt-mhaodh,

poch (Iain Lom), all on clan or historical themes except for a drinking song, "A bhean, leasaich an stop dhuinn." They appear under the author's name, and show the length of his career from the Civil War in the 1640s to the Union of the Parliaments in 1707. There are two pieces each from the eighteenth-century poets Alexander MacDonald (Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair) and Rob Donn Mackay of Sutherland, and there is one song by Duncan Ban Macintyre. The items by MacDonald and Macintyre appear anonymously, but another contemporary poet, John MacCodrum is represented by a block of pieces all under his own name, suggesting that Gillies had contact with someone in North Uist who was concerned to promote MacCodrum's work. The works of Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair and of Duncan Ban Macintyre were already in print.⁹

Gillies's section of clan and historical poems concentrates on poems associated with mainland clans. As would be expected in a Perthshire collection, songs about Clan Gregor are featured. The two representative poems are from the early seventeenth century, "Mac Grigair a Ruaro" (MacGregor of Roro), and "Soighdean Ghlinn Liomhuinn," (Arrows of Glenlyon).¹⁰ The main group of poems connected with an island clan are the MacCodrum poems to Sir James MacDonald, but it is also to be noted that Gillies has the first printed version of the MacLean elegy "An Crònan Muileach," composed in the seventeenth century. In common with *Eigg* and the nineteenth-century collections, the one clan not represented is Clan Campbell. The only piece which can be claimed to have a Campbell connection is a poem on the Massacre of Glencoe by "Bàrd Mhic Iain."

A notable feature among the historical poems in Gillies is the virtual absence of Jacobite songs. This is probably to appease readers, who, particularly in Perth, still found the topic sensitive.¹¹ Gillies's historical poems concentrate on an earlier heroic past, the seventeenth century with the hero Alasdair Mac Colla to whom there is a eulogy. Gillies's account of this heroic age ends at the Battle of Killiecrankie in Perthshire, 1689. There is one song against the Union of the Parliaments in 1707, probably included because it is by the great poet of the previous century, Iain Lom, and would indicate the length of his career. This song is his last known work.¹²

⁹See Donald MacLean.

¹⁰Alasdair Duncan, "Some MacGregor Songs," unpublished M. Litt. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1979.

¹¹D. Crawford Smith, *The historians of Perth* (Perth, 1906).

¹²*Orain Iain Luim*, ed. Annie Mackenzie (Edinburgh, 1964).

(246)

Cha d' fhiofraich, cha d' fharraid,
Cha do ghabh e mo fgeula.
Na h u, &c.

Cha bann aig bha choire,
Ach nach d' fhuirich mi fhein ris.

Gu'n cinnich an Domhnach
Le Clann-Domhnuil san gear lana.

Luchd na'm boghanna iudhair
Chuiridh fiubhal fuidh shaighdibh.

Luchd nan claidheanna geala
Chuireadh failcas re grein djabh.

Luchd nam musgaide tromabh
Chumail coinneamh re chëlle.

Thug sibh mionnan a Bhiobail
Ann frath iofal uilt-eirinn.

Nach d' re' cloidheamh an duille
Gus an cruinte Rìgh seumus.

Oran le oigh d'a leannan, a bha 'n cunntart a
treigeadh.

TRI nithean gun iarraidh.
'S e eagal, is iadach is gaol,
'S bu bheag a chuis mhallaidh
Ge d' ghlacadh leis mis air a h' son,
'S a liuthad bean usfal
A fhuaras fa chiont ud robh mi,
A thug an gaol fuadain
Air ro bheagan duaise ga chionn.

*Fàil irin illirinn uillirinn.
Oro laoidh*

Gruaidh

Gillies's next historical topic is the Highland regiments and the accepted use of Highland dress, otherwise banned, in the British army as "The Garb of Old Gaul." There are two songs on these topics, first a Gaelic translation of "With the Garb of Old Gaul" with the original English text on the facing page, and then "Oran a rinneadh d' an chath-bhuidhinn Rioghail Ghaoidheallach nuair bha iad dol d' America San bhliadhna 1756." This song describes the part taken by the Black Watch in the capture of Quebec and the Heights of Abraham. This song would have local appeal as the regiment was raised at Aberfeldy.

As already pointed out, Gillies is notable in his choice of love songs by showing an interest in the popular repertoire and by providing fixed texts. He is unusual in comparison with *Eigg* in having as many as four religious pieces since most religious poetry would by now be printed in special collections, as in the case of the poems of Dugald Buchanan, or with prose works, which were all religious. Two of the hymns Gillies includes were already in print, and he has nothing by the major Perthshire poet, Dugald Buchanan, whose works were already in print. With *Eigg* Gillies shares the aristocratic topic of hunting, but this does not last into the nineteenth century collections. Gillies has a number of satires. Two of these, one by John MacCodrum and the other possibly by Niall Mór Mac Mhuirich, are about pipers. Ranald MacDonald did not have satires on this subject, and in the nineteenth-century collections there is only one occurrence of the Mac Mhuirich song, probably because of its composer. Gillies incorporated a pamphlet containing three songs satirizing Samuel Johnson's comments, such as his seeing through James Macpherson's *Ossian*, and Ranald MacDonald has one song on the topic. By the nineteenth century the subject was out of date and does not appear again.

Gillies has songs about hunting, two of which overlap with those giving descriptions of topography. The oldest is "Oran na Comhachaig," (The Song of the Owl) dating from the sixteenth century,¹³ and more recent is "Eas Mhóir-oir" (Mór-oir Waterfall) by John Mackay, the Blind Piper.¹⁴ It is to be noted that these songs, unlike many such songs in the nineteenth century, are very precise in their descriptions of the landscape.

Gillies printed three songs on the theme of drink, and it is to be noted that only one mentions whisky, "Comunn an uisge-beatha" by Lachlan Macpherson of Strathmashie, beginning

¹³Robert A. Rankin, "Oran na Comhachaig, Text and Tradition," *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Glasgow*, 5 (1958), 125-71.

¹⁴Derick S. Thomson, *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland* (Oxford, 1983).

Fear mo ghaoil an t uisge-bheatha,
(whisky is the one I love),

and discussion of the evils of drink has not yet appeared.

He still has love songs of aristocratic origin, and forms a bridge between *Eigg* and the later collections whose love songs are all popular. The Gillies anthology includes anonymous folk songs, but has still not discarded songs of aristocratic origin.

The poems by contemporary poets may have been included to make the collection sell, but the works of Rob Donn Mackay and John MacCodrum were not in print, and Gillies is important for having the block of MacCodrum pieces appearing in exactly the same order as in the manuscripts written by James McLagan of Blair Atholl, from which collection most of the poems in Gillies come.

University of Edinburgh