

Shedding New Light on the Origins of the Strathspey



Will Lamb

The strathspey, the dance and its associated music, has a distinctive place within the RSCDS tradition. Most of the traditional strathspeys published by the RSCDS date back to the eighteenth century. But what are the origins of the music?

The word 'strathspey' means more than one thing. Literally, it means the valley of the River Spey in the Scottish Highlands. It is also a form of dance, a tempo, a rhythm, and a tune. Eighteenth-century written records use the words 'reel', 'strathspey', and 'strathspey-reel' with little distinction made between them. Books of Scottish 'reels' can contain tunes which have all the characteristics of the strathspey. It is clear that historically there was some connection between the reel and the strathspey, even if today in the RSCDS we treat them as very distinct entities. I have been in classes where the musician has announced that a certain reel sounds much better if played at strathspey tempo and vice versa. The 1749 Castle Menzies manuscript describes both *The Montgomerie's Rant* and *Couteraller's Rant* as 'Strathspey Reeles', the former published as a reel in RSCDS *Book 10*, the latter as a strathspey in *Book 34*.

The accepted view of the strathspey is that it is a form of fiddle music which developed in the Speyside area of the Scottish Highlands in the early part of the eighteenth century, its earliest proponents being the Browns of Kincardine-on-Spey and the Cummings of Grantown. This view can be dated very precisely to Thomas Newte's *Prospects and Observations; On a Tour in England and Scotland*, published in 1791. This fiddle music was developed by musicians such as Niel Gow and William Marshall, who composed some of the most memorable strathspey tunes which we still dance to today. The modern violin, however,

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was not an indigenous Scottish instrument. When it arrived in Scotland is a matter for debate, but it is believed that around 1700 its use was starting to spread. Can we trust Newte's account?

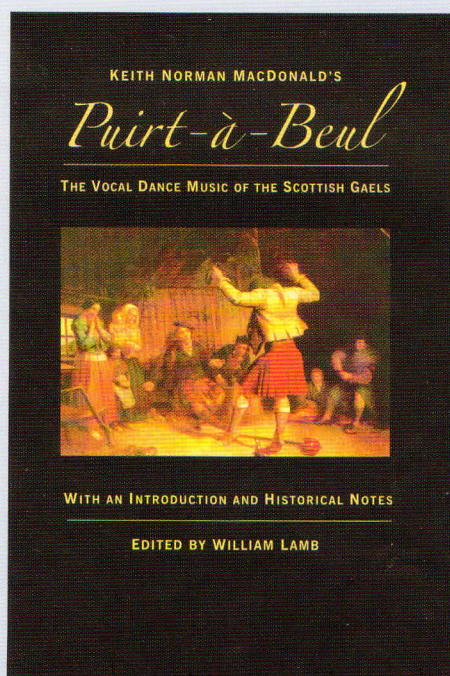
In the early eighteenth century the Scottish Highlands were predominantly Gaelic-speaking. Dr Lamb points out that Newte – and there is no evidence that he actually visited the Spey valley – was writing about his travels in an area where he could not communicate with the vast majority of the people he came into contact with, much less understand their culture. Like his more famous contemporary and commentator on Highland life, Samuel Johnson, Newte had no Gaelic. Bringing together his work on Gaelic, Gaelic culture and the Gaelic song tradition in particular, Dr Lamb is convinced that the roots of the strathspey lie much further back in an oral tradition of which Newte and his English-speaking contemporaries could have had little knowledge or understanding.

Dr Lamb has discovered some critical clues in the earliest published strathspeys. As publishing is and was a costly and risky business – all the printing costs come before one copy is sold – it was common to publish on a subscription basis. This means that a book would be advertised to its potential buyers who would commit to buying it, their names appearing on a list of subscribers. As soon as enough subscribers had been enlisted to cover the costs, printing could go ahead. Any extra sales would be pure profit.

An example of this is Angus Cumming's *A Collection of Strathspey, or Old Highland Reels* of 1780. Dr Lamb has calculated that around 70% of the tune titles are dedicatory, honouring one of the subscribers. Of these 40% were members of the aristocracy or the educated classes: *Dutchess of Gordan's Reell*, *Dutchess of Athole's Reell*, *Dr Wm Grant's Reell*. However, a high proportion of the tunes have subtitles in Gaelic, many clearly recognisable as the words of an earlier Gaelic dance song. He gives the example of 'Arndilly's Reel' with the Gaelic subtitle 'Biodag air MacThòmais' (Thomas's Son Wears a Dirk), a song which was well-known throughout Gaelic-speaking Scotland. Arndilly House, built in 1770 for the Grant family, was the centrepiece of a magnificent estate overlooking the River Spey.

More evidence comes from William Gunn in his collection of dance tunes of 1848. Dr Lamb quotes, 'the original Gaelic designations by which the [pieces] have been known in the Highlands . . . consist generally of something peculiar or striking in the verse or verses to which they were composed.' Dr Lamb concludes that some of the oldest tunes described as 'strathspeys' are actually based on Gaelic song.

It is well to remember that three hundred years ago copyright law was not as we understand it today. If a musician knew a traditional tune, there was nothing to stop him publishing it along with tunes he had composed himself. So, when we hear a tune 'by' a famous eighteenth-century fiddler, it



Cover image of Will Lamb's book: Gille Callum danced to puirt à beul

might be by him or it might be a tune he heard and decided was worth publishing. In the field of music and dance the concept of intellectual property did not exist.

What then were the Gaelic sources? Gaelic culture was and to a certain extent still is an oral culture. Even today you will hear songs – and styles of singing – which have been handed down from singer to singer through the generations. Gaelic has a long tradition of songs which accompany movement. The movement might be dancing and the music 'puirt à beul' – mouth music. I am sure many people will remember watching dancers doing the Highland Schottische to the singing of Johan MacLean at Summer School. More probably the songs will be the accompaniment to some form of work – grinding corn, spinning wool, waulking cloth, rowing, or a mother's gentle rocking of her child as she sings a lullaby.

Using recorded material from the archive of

the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh University, Dr Lamb has experimented with tempo. He has shown that when you slow down a Gaelic song or piped reel, what you end up with sounds very like a strathspey. He has also found that the strathspey rhythm exists in a variety of Gaelic work songs when you speed them up to strathspey tempo. He has also looked at Gaelic instrumental music by 'stitching together' two recordings of piping and song: one a traditional strathspey, the other a slowed-down reel. The join is seamless. More surprisingly, he has taken a traditional Gaelic lullaby. Speeded up to strathspey tempo, the rhythmic similarities are striking.

All of Dr Lamb's musical examples above can be heard on a YouTube recording (LP188D6Phlo) to accompany his paper 'Reeling in the Strathspey: The Origins of Scotland's National Music'. He concludes that the strathspey rhythm underlies a large proportion of Gaelic movement

songs. Significantly for us in the RSCDS, he is convinced that the strathspey is almost certainly rooted in Gaelic song rather than in the eighteenth-century fiddle tradition. The vigorous waulking of cloth, the rocking of a baby, the rhythmic dipping and lifting of oars are all binary movements setting up a rhythm, clearly recognisable both in Gaelic song and in our strathspeys. Try it for yourself. Type *puirt à beul* into YouTube. Then practise your strathspey steps!

Reference

Lamb, William. 2013. 'Reeling in the strathspey: The origins of Scotland's national music', *Scottish Studies*, 36: 66-102.

Jimmie Hill is indebted to Dr Will Lamb for his time and for making his research paper 'Reeling in the Strathspey' available to him. He would also like to thank Jim Healy for the examples from the Castle Menzies manuscript.