

***The Emigrant Experience : Songs of Highland Emigrants in North America.* By Margaret MacDonell (Toronto, Buffalo, London : University of Toronto Press, 1982. 229 p.)**

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## Comptes rendus/Reviews

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### **The Emigrant Experience : Songs of Highland Emigrants in North America**

By Margaret MacDonell

(Toronto, Buffalo, London : University of Toronto Press, 1982. 229 p.)

The year 1746 stands out as a notable turning point in the history of the Scottish Highlands. Not only did it bring the devastating defeat at Culloden, but it marked the beginning of the collapse of the ancient clan system, and the radical changes that ensued within the Highland social structure. One result was the huge wave of emigration to the New World, from the 1750's to the late 1800's approximately — and the mere mention of that era seems to stir Highland blood on both sides of the Atlantic.

Already documented in countless books, the subject of this emigration holds endless fascination. Margaret MacDonell's book, *The Emigrant Experience : Songs of Highland Emigrants in North America*, is not, however, just another history.

"... the simple poetic observations of the people most directly affected constitute an independent source of information and are of great value and interest."

And indeed they are !

We have seen the documents ; we have read the books ; now we have an opportunity of sharing some of the innermost feelings of those who experienced emigration and, as a result of it, were inspired to compose their songs.

Margaret MacDonell, herself a native Gaelic speaker, is Chairman of the Department of Celtic studies at St. Francis

Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia. Her collection of emigrant songs is "based on the Scottish Gaelic holdings in the libraries of Harvard University and in the Special Collections of the Angus L. MacDonald Library of St. Francis Xavier University". The format of the book is : Introduction ; six chapters of songs, each one arranged according to the specific geographic area to which they pertain in North America ; a selection of Airs ; a Select Bibliography ; Notes to each chapter ; and finally, Indexes to Proper Names, Place Names, and a Glossarial Index.

The general introduction is concise, and places the song collection in an historical setting (with a good guideline for those who may seek further historical information from more detailed sources). There is interesting comment on the strong bardic tradition of the Scottish Gaels, and for those of us who may wonder why certain songs and bards are conspicuous by their absence, Margaret MacDonell points out that she has omitted those already well-documented which do not "fit easily into a collection of less celebrated compositions." While on the subject of omissions, I would deduce that Newfoundland and Quebec songs are not represented for the obvious reason that they did not appear in the holdings at Harvard and St. Francis Xavier.

Biographic details on each of the twenty bards introduce the individual groups of songs. Many of the compositions were never written down originally, but were transmitted orally over several decades (more than a century in some cases), testifying to the strength of the oral tradition among the Gaels. Some

were, however, representative of "the unusual Gaelic literary tradition... fostered for many years by clerical and lay scholars."

The songs themselves are filled with social comment: they tell of the greed and cruelty of the new breed of landowners that prompted their evictions; the introduction of sheep and the mutton-in-lieu-of-man mentality adopted by the landlords; the impoverished conditions and utter starvation; the total absence of any prospects of a better future if they should remain in the Old Country. Some Bards tell of the deceitful oratory that persuaded many to leave their homeland, endure a dreadful journey, and settle in a thickly forested land where the winter was so cold they even doubted if they would survive. But the majority did survive, and it is, in fact, the notes of optimism that ring out above the complainings — "Aite b'fheàrr dhomh dùbailt" (a place twice as good for me) is how one Bard puts it, as he praises the new land that holds no restrictions over anyone who is willing to work hard. They rejoice in the freedom from oppression and discrimination, from hunger and starvation, and from greedy, cruel landlords. The one thing which the exiled Highlanders all long to hold on to is the strong Gaelic traditions upheld by their forebears — the language, the *sgeulachdan* (story-telling), the songs, the customs they observed for generations are all held dear. A few Bards who migrated within North America in hopes of bettering their livelihood, sorely lamented the decline of their traditions when they found themselves having to talk English. Whether they composed in the Old Country or the New, the main characteristic which seems to distinguish the Bards is the "nostalgic eloquence" which they all seem to display.

Each Gaelic text is followed by a careful translation, and although Margaret MacDonell seems painfully aware of the restrictions of translation, she preserves faithfully as much of the sentiment, imagery, subtlety, and humour as is pos-

sible. And in a language as highly descriptive as Gaelic (close to a score of different words for "love" — try putting that "in your own words"!) that is quite an achievement.

Though airs transcribed are few in number (many have been lost over the years), it is fortunate that samples which survive are included so that we may at least taste their flavour. To the non-Gael they may seem strangely modal; to many ears, however, they may sound pleasingly familiar.

Just as many of the Bards end their songs on a note of exhortation to the Gaels, urging them not to forget their homeland, its language or culture, so also Margaret MacDonell ends her discussion with an exhortation to the folklorist not to neglect further research on other aspects of the Scottish Canadian scene. She has given us a delightful sampler from what must be a much larger tapestry.

Margaret BENNETT  
Scotland

### La chanson du pays

Par Georges Arsenault  
(Summerside, Île-du-Prince-Édouard :  
La Société Saint-Thomas d'Aquin, 1983.  
52 p., 28 cm, et cassette  
d'accompagnement de 90 minutes.)

Georges Arsenault nous présentait il y a quelque temps une anthologie de 30 chansons traditionnelles destinées à l'enseignement. Cette publication s'inscrivait dans le cadre plus vaste d'un « projet d'histoire et de culture acadiennes », dont l'auteur était le coordonnateur-rechercheur. Compte tenu de ses antécédents d'ethnographe-folkloriste, il était normal que les premières productions émanant de cette opération privilégièrent les traditions orales.