

**Heather Sparling. *Reeling Roosters and Dancing Ducks: Celtic Mouth Music*. (Sydney, NS: 2014, Cape Breton University Press. Pp. xv + 356, index, ISBN 978-1-927492-98-7.)**

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research for this book, MacLean draws heavily on the first-hand accounts and recollections of the people who lived the experience. It is important to note that the word “anecdotal” is actually part of the title, suggesting that oral storytelling will be prominent in the narrative. Second, MacLean writes in a very accessible manner, in a way that allows the reader complete access to the history of the communities on the Washabuck Peninsula. The writing is non-academic, aimed at a non-specialist audience, and the book is constructed in an informal manner that allows the reader to browse through the community’s history in a non-linear way.

MacLean has delivered an impressive account of everyday life and work in rural Cape Breton over a hundred-year period. Through personal stories and photographic evidence, he contextualizes the history of this group of communities and offers the reader a unique perspective into a world that is as familiar as some of our own communities, yet infused with the unique influence of Gaelic culture.

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Heather Sparling. *Reeling Roosters and Dancing Ducks: Celtic Mouth Music*. (Sydney, NS: 2014, Cape Breton University Press. Pp. xv + 356, index, ISBN 978-1-927492-98-7.)

*Reeling Roosters and Dancing Ducks: Celtic Mouth Music* is a recent book by Heather Sparling, an Associate Professor of Ethnomusicology at Cape Breton University and Tier 2 Canada Research Chair (Musical Traditions). Published by Cape Breton University Press, the monograph represents many years of work; it is a reworking of her master’s thesis (2000) but is also clearly informed by her doctoral thesis and more recent research into Gaelic language and culture as well. While this is a book that is very clearly academic in nature, it is written for a general audience, a difficult balance that Sparling successfully maintains.

The book is a survey of “mouth music” in Scotland and Cape Breton, focusing more specifically on *puirt-à-beul*. While the term mouth music can be used to refer to many different styles of vocal performances of instrumental

music, some consisting entirely of either improvised or even predetermined nonsense syllables (vocables), *puirt-à-beul* are a specific genre of Gaelic song. In some ways akin to nursery rhymes, they are light-hearted, often bawdy in nature, and lack the flowery, esoteric poetry of “serious” Gaelic songs. Sparling explores the role of *puirt-à-beul*, generally thought of as silly or insignificant, in instrumental tune transmission, dance accompaniment, and commercial audio recordings, as well as contemporary Gaelic language education. The book includes extensive lyrical transcription of *puirt-à-beul* in both Gaelic and English throughout, which would be particularly useful for anyone with an interest in, or knowledge of, the Gaelic language.

With relatively little scholarly research done on *puirt-à-beul*, this is a book that fills a significant gap in the literature. Moreover, Sparling is well-positioned for such a study. As a topic that straddles both the fields of Celtic studies and ethnomusicology, research on Gaelic music can be challenging. Too often scholars lack sufficient background in one of these two areas. It is common for academics to be highly knowledgeable in Gaelic language and culture while having no background in ethnomusicology (or music in general), or conversely, to be knowledgeable ethnomusicologists who lack the linguistic skills to properly contextualize their musical analysis. One of Sparling’s inherent strengths is her ability to seamlessly incorporate the perspectives of these two disciplines, each with different priorities and values.

The book begins with an in-depth look at mouth music (Chapter 1), exploring both the use of informal and improvised vocables. Sparling discusses solfege and *Cantaireachd* (a system of vocables specifically for Scottish bagpiping), but also makes cross-cultural comparisons to equivalents in Indian classical music and jazz. In doing so, she carefully demonstrates the shared characteristics and uses of different mouth musics, while contextualizing *puirt-à-beul* as a distinct genre. In Chapter 2, Sparling continues to address the historical-cultural background of *puirt-à-beul* by investigating various origin theories of the genre. She provides a thorough historical investigation of widely held beliefs about these origins, such as the proscription of the bagpipes following the battle of Culloden, religious pressures, or connections to ancient Druidic language. Sparling challenges each of these beliefs, while carefully acknowledging they function as important narratives in the culture, regardless of their veracity. She contends that the origins of *puirt-à-beul* “likely emerged in unremarkable ways for fairly mundane reasons,” though the lack of historical evidence is insufficient to draw any verifiable conclusions and is, at best, conjecture (95).

The middle portion of the book is dedicated to textual analysis, both in relation to musical and lyrical content of *puirt-à-beul* (Chapters 3 and 4, respectively). In a musical context, Sparling demonstrates how *puirt-à-beul* melodies relate to their purely instrumental counterparts, particularly in relation to how they are adapted for vocal performance. Chapter 4 includes potential lyrical interpretations of common examples of *puirt-à-beul*, relating them to the role of humour and bawdry.

The final three chapters focus on more functions of *puirt-à-beul* in various contexts. Chapter 5 examines a particularly prominent aspect of *puirt-à-beul*: their relationship to dance. Drawing on classic historical research by dance scholars such as George Emmerson as well more recent work by Celticist Michael Newton and ethnochoreologist Mats Melin, Sparling investigates early forms of step dance and European set dances that were the antecedents to more modern square dance in Cape Breton and other parts of North America. She details how *puirt-à-beul* were traditionally performed for dance purposes, most notably when instrumentalists were unavailable.

Chapters 6 and 7 discuss other functions of *puirt-à-beul*, such as their role in the transmission of instrumental dance repertoire and more recent performance in commercial audio recordings, as well as their significance to modern Gaelic learners. Sparling argues that *puirt-à-beul* “remain important in Gaelic culture because they function as a ‘cultural lynchpin’ or a nexus point, connecting and integrating diverse strands of expressive culture, including language, music, dance, and storytelling” (297). Although *puirt-à-beul* may seem to be an insignificant part of Gaelic culture to some, Sparling counters that their cultural functions are relatively diverse and have changed over time. In many contexts today, *puirt-à-beul* serve as an entry point to the Gaelic language and many interrelated aspects of the culture as a whole.

Sparling’s work is admirable in both its depth and breadth, successfully engaging in detailed, yet clear explanations of complex, often murky topics of the Highland Clearances, Celticism, and the romanticism frequently associated with them. Moreover, despite the substantial historical content of the book, Sparling is also careful to relate her research to Gaelic culture in a modern context. There are generous references to resources for further research, particularly audio recordings of Gaelic song. Some of these resources are available online, either on YouTube or in archives, which make them accessible to readers.

The greatest strength of the book is its ability to go far beyond the musically or culturally specific aspects of the study, making it much more relevant to other disciplines. Above all else, I read this book as a case study of transmission, and in some cases, belief. By combining written historical and oral ethnographic sources, Sparling traces aspects of Gaelic culture and music over several centuries, detailing the changing function and discourses that surround them. Most importantly, she is able to make such assertions in a manner that is both clear and tactful, distinguishing between widely held cultural beliefs and objective historical fact while still being respectful to her participants. As such, this is a book that accurately presents the messiness of oral transmission in folklore and the ways in which tradition evolves, diverges, and re-assembles itself in complex and often unexpected ways.

While this is a book written for a general readership, there are some portions of the book in which having a musical background would be advantageous. Sparling offers basic explanations of music theory to contextualize some of her discussions, but these sometimes fall flat. While accurate and succinct, I found such explanations to be either unnecessary for someone with a basic understanding of music theory or insufficiently developed for someone who is largely unfamiliar with the subject matter. This, however, is a constant challenge in ethnomusicological writing as a whole; in an interdisciplinary field, communicating musical ideas with non-musicians is crucial, but musical analysis can also be extremely important. An in-depth explanation of the rudiments of Western music theory is sometimes required to fully understand analysis, which would be out of place and far beyond the scope of most studies.

This is a publication that has an emphasis on history and text, which is relatively standard for a broad survey on a given topic. However, I would have liked to see a more developed discussion of broader cultural issues related to the Gaelic community. The last portion of the book (particularly her final chapter) began to address some fascinating issues surrounding power, cultural capital, and how Gaelic culture is represented in Nova Scotia. Disappointingly, the work of scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu and Ian McKay that developed Sparling's research in truly dynamic ways was mentioned largely in passing. Nevertheless, these final pages are rich in content and extremely useful for academic research, but an entire second book could be written on such issues. Admittedly, this is, to some extent beyond the scope of this particular publication and largely the focus of her doctoral thesis. Moreover, such content can easily become much

more esoteric and academic in nature, and such omissions likely reflect the intended audience for whom the book was written. This criticism, of course, exposes my own biases as an academic.

Overall, I found this to be an enjoyable, well-balanced book. Sparling's writing is clear and direct, making it a book that is useful for scholarly research, as well as being wonderfully accessible to general readers. Well-researched and presented, it fills an important gap in Gaelic and Cape Breton scholarly work.

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Ian Brodie. *A Vulgar Art: A New Approach to Stand-Up Comedy*. (Jackson: 2014, University Press of Mississippi. Pp. 255. ISBN: 978-1-62846-182-4)

Ian Brodie presents the first examination of stand-up comedy through the lens of folklore in *A Vulgar Art: A New Approach to Stand-Up Comedy*. This reviewer was enchanted by Brodie's examination of interpersonal, artistic communication and presentation, but, at the same time, was leery of the obvious reverence that Brodie seemed to hold for comedian Bill Cosby. The timing of the release of this book was unfortunate, as accusations regarding Cosby's exploits were ubiquitous in the news and social media. However, upon further reflection, Brodie's regard for Cosby had very little to do with the man himself and everything to do with his performance as a stand-up comedian, and so I could also dissociate the two faces of the man as featured in the book (past) and in the media (present).

Turning to the title of the book, vulgar means, in its most basic definition, of the people and is absolutely the most effective word for what the book explores although, to be sure, the double entendre is not to be sneezed at in any way. Brodie's examination of the art of stand-up comedy reflects on the entire context, environment, and concerns of performing comedy effectively. His folkloric lens focuses on minute details, such as microphones and clothing, to wider concerns, such as bridging the various elements of intimacy between a performer on the stage and his or