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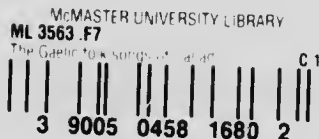
SECTION II

ENGLISH HISTORY LITERATURE, ARCHÆOLOGY, ETC.

The Gaelic Folk Songs of Canada

By ALEXANDER FRASER

Toronto



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V.—*The Gaelic Folk-Songs of Canada.*

By ALEXANDER FRASER, Toronto, Ont.

(Communicated by W. W. Campbell and read May 20, 1903.)

"Cànain aigh nam buadhan oirdheare,
A b' fharsuing cliù air feadh na h-Eòrpa;
Bithidh i fathast mar a thoisich,
Os ceann gach calnnt 'na h-luchair eòlais."

TRANSLATED:—

"Strange mystic powers lie in that tongue,
Whose praise through Europe wide has rung;
As 'twas of yore in school and college,
It shall be first—the key of knowledge."

Two explanatory words may be allowed.

1. By Gaelic is meant only that branch of the Keltic language whose home and chief habitat are the Highlands of Scotland.

2. The field. It has been estimated that there is about a quarter of a million people in Canada who understand and speak the Gaelic language.

No people are more devoted to their native language than the Scottish Kelts. They have cherished it and retained it through centuries of struggle and vicissitude, as a precious heritage, and in the freer atmosphere of to-day, the old vernacular holds its own against the encroachments of the language of commerce with equal success as in the olden time it did against the prejudices of alien educators and hostile lawgivers. It has come down from sire to son on the plains of Canada with almost equal purity as in the glens and straths of Caledonia.

"'Si Iabhair Padric 'n Innise Fall na Rìogh,
'S an falghe caomh sin Colum nàomtha 'n I."

TRANSLATED:—

"'Twas it that Patrick spoke in Inis-Fayle,
And saintly Calum in Iona's Isle."

The printed literature of the Scottish Gael is not extensive, but a Gaelic literature there is, which will compare favourably with the literature of many other countries, and, if taken with that of its kindred branches, is of very respectable proportions indeed. Probably four-fifths of it is poetry. The Kelts are a poetical people; the clansman lived in an atmosphere of poetry and romance; every village had its bard, every family its ready singer. The very vicissitudes of the people

bred idealism and poetic fancy, and their mental pabulum was the song of the minstrel and story of the *scanachie*. The scarcity, or entire absence of books had the effect of quickening and strengthening the memory, and the ordinary peasant could generally repeat a marvellous quantity of verse. Thus, folk songs passed from generation to generation, becoming sacred in the process, through tender associations dear to the heart of the emotional Gael. The epochs of song correspond to the great national movements which affected the condition or stirred the emotions of the people as a whole. Thus, the Jacobite risings of 1715 and 1745 A.D., were followed by revivals of Gaelic song, the latter date, inaugurating what has been termed the Augustan age of Highland poetry, with its great names—Macdonald, MacIntyre, Buchanan, Mackay and Ross. Following the Jacobite defeat at Culloden came a period of unrest and change in the Highlands from which relief was sought in the new homes of America. Wave upon wave of emigration succeeded, until the landowners and government became alarmed and enacted measures prohibiting the people to leave their native country. These measures, however, were relaxed and the mountaineers, by tens of thousands sought homes in Canada and in the United States. This was at a time when Gaelic poetry was at its best, and when the vanishing echoes of the Jacobite muse were re-awakened by the social upheaval caused by the depopulating of the glens.

The clansmen carried with them not only the treasured songs of the past, but the warm verses wrung from the local bards by the sad scenes incident to the departure of whole country-sides of the native people, leaving nothing but desolation behind them; and the songs, too, which many of those departing composed as "Farewells" to their native land. These songs abound. Many of them are of poetic merit, and are sung in Canada even at the present day. Two of the most popular tunes played on shore as the emigrant ships weighed anchor were "MacCrimmon's Lament" and "Lochaber No More." The first is one of the most pathetic in Highland minstrelsy and its effect to-day is as great on a Gaelic-speaking Highlander as in the emigration days. MacCrimmon, was one of a famous family of pipers, which for generations were retained by the chief of the Clan MacLeod, at Dunvegan Castle, Isle of Skye. They are supposed to have been originally from Cremona, Italy. The family held land from MacLeod, the son succeeding the father in possession and in the office of piper. The name of their farm was Borerraig, and here a piper's college was conducted to which the noblemen and gentlemen of the north of Scotland sent their young pipers to be instructed in bagpipe music, the ordinary term of apprenticeship being seven years. In 1745, MacLeod, of Dunvegan, espoused the side of the house of Hanover, in the Stuart rising. Mac-

Crimmon, the hereditary piper, seems to have had a premonition that he should fall in the war, and accompanied his chief reluctantly. On the eve of his departure he is said to have composed the piobaireachd known as "MacCrimmon's Lament," and the Gaelic words which have been paraphrased by Sir Walter Scott, viz:—

CUMHA MHC-CRÍOMTHAIN.

Bratach bhoadhail Mhic-Leoid o'n tùr mhòr a' lasadh,
'S luchd lomradh nan rannh greasadh bhàrc thar a ghlas-chuan;
Bogha, sgiath, 's claidheamh mòr, 's tuagh gu leòn, airm nam fleasgach,
'S Mac-Críomthain cluch cuairt, "Soraidh bhuan do Dhun Bheagain."

Slan leis gach creig àrd ris 'bheil gairich ard-thonnan,
Slan leis gach gleann fàs 's dean cràc-dhaimh an langan;
Eilean Sgiathanalach aigh! slan le d'bhannataibh 's guirm' fìrich,
Tìllidh, dh' fheutadh, MacLeoid, ach cha bheò do Mhac-Críomthain.

Soraidh bhuan do'n gheal-cheò, a tha comhdachadh Chullinn,
Slan leis gach blà-shùil, 'th'air an Dùn, 's iad a' tuireadh!
Soraidh bhuan do'n luchd-clùil, 's tric 'chuir sunnd orm is tioma—
Sheòl Mac-Críomthain thar sàil, is gu brath cha till tuilleadh.

Nuallan all' na pìob-mhoir a cluich marbh-rann an fhìlth,
Agus dearbh bhrat a bhàis mar fhalluing aig' ulme;
Ach cha mheataich mo chridh' is cha ragaich mo chullean,
Ged dh' fhalbham le m' dheòin, 's fìos nach till mi chaoidh tuilleadh.

'S tric a chluinnear fuaim bhinn caoi thiom-chridh' Mhic-Críomthain,
'N uair 'bhìos Gaidheil a' falbh thar an fhainge 'g an Iomain—
O! chaonh thir ar graldh, o do thraigh 's rag ar n-imeachd;
Och! cha till, cha till, cha till sinn tuilleadh.

Translated by Sir Walter Scott:—

MacLeod's wizard flag from the grey castle sallies,
The rowers are seated, unmoored are the galleys,
Gleam war-axe and broad-sword, clang target and quiver,
As MacCrimmon plays, "Farewell to Dunvogan for ever!"

"Farewell to each cliff, on which breakers are foaming;
Farewell, each dark glen, in which red deer are roaming;
Farewell, lonely Skye, to lake, mountain, and river;
MacLeod may return, but MacCrimmon shall never!"

"Farewell the bright clouds that on Coolin are sleeping;
Farewell the bright eyes in the fort that are weeping;
To each mistrel delusion, farewell; and for ever—
MacCrimmon departs, to return to you never!"

"The Banshee's wild voice sings the death-dirge before me,
And the pall of the dead for a mantle hangs o'er me;
But my heart shall not flag, and my nerve shall not quiver,
Though devoted I go—to return again never!"

*Too oft shall the note of MacCrimmon's bewailing
Be heard when the Gael on their exile are sailing:—
"Dear Land! to the shores, whence unwilling we sever
Return—return—return, we shall never!"*

In the famous "Rout of Moy" MacCrimmon fell, and his premonition was fulfilled. In Skye his death was mourned by his sweetheart, who is made pathetically to lament his death, in the following lines which are those usually sung to the tune, "MacCrimmon's Lament":—

Dh' iadh ceo man stùc mu aodann Chulainn;
Gu' n d' sheinn a bhean shìth a torgann mulaid.
Tha sùilean gorm, clùn, 's an Dùn ri sìleadh;
O'n thrial! thu bh' uainn, 's nach till thu tuille.

Cha till, cha till, cha till MacCrimmon,
An cogadh no sìth cha till e tuille;
Le a' glod no ni cha till MacCrimmon;
Cha till gu brath gu la na cruinne.

Tha osag nan gleann gu fann ag imeachd
Gach sruthan 's gach allt, gu mall le bruthtach,
Tha falt nan speur feagh gheùgan dubhach;
Ag caoidh gun d' fhalbh, 's nach till thu tuille.

Cha till, cha till, etc.

Tha'n fhalrge fadheòidh, lan bròin a's mulad;
Tha'm bata fo sheòl, ach dhiult i sìubhal,
Tha gaire nan tonn, le fuaim neo-shubhach,
Ag radh gun d' fhalbh, 's nach till thu tuille.

Cha till, cha till, etc.

Cha cluinnear do cheòl 's an Dùn mu fheasgair;
No Mactalla na mùr, le mùirn g'a fhreagairt;
Gach fleasgach a's oigh, gun cheòl gun bheadradh,
O'n thrial! thu bh' uainn, 's nach till thu tuille.

Cha till, cha till, etc.

Translated by Lachlan MacBean:

O'er Coolin's cliffs the night is creeping,
The banshee's wail is round us sweeping,
Blue eyes in Dùn are sadly weeping,
Since thou art gone, and ne'er returnest.

The breeze of the bens is gently flowing,
The brooks in the glens are softly flowing,
Where boughs their darkest shades are throwing,
Birds mourn for thee who ne'er returnest.

It's dirges of woe the sea is sighing,
The boat under sail unmoved is lying,
The voice of the waves in sadness dying
Say thou art away and ne'er returnest.

We'll see no more MacCrimmon's returning,
 Nor in peace nor in war is he returning,
 Till dawns the great day of woe and burning,
 For him, for him, there's no returning.

These verses lose much in the translation. In the original they are remarkable for beauty of diction and for the depth of tender feeling they express, and one can easily understand the enduring impression they would make upon the minds of sorrowing emigrants, especially when sung to one of the sweetest minor melodies in the treasury of Gaelic music.

To this class belongs Evan MacColl's (a charter member of the Royal Society) "Beannachd Dheireannach an Eilthirich Gàidheal"—"The Highland Emigrant's Farewell," one of the best emigrant songs in the language, the concluding lines of which are:

* * * * *

Uair eile, 's gu bràth,
 Beannachd bhliath leat, mo dhuthaich!
 Ged robh gu Lath'-luain
 Falach-cuain ort bho m' shùil-sa,
 Gu deireadh mo chuairt,
 Gearr no buan, b' dh mi 'g urnuigh,
 O! Ard-rìgh nan dùl,
 Beannaich duthaich mo ghràidh!

In this poem MacColl describes his father's feelings, overcome by strong emotion as the mountain peaks of his native land recedes from his view, and in turning away after the darkness has closed the scene, the stern-visaged Gael vows eternal devotion to his native land, and invokes a benediction upon its future. This poem, or song, composed to the tune, "Erin gu bràth," has been sung in the Old Land and in Canada by at least two generations, separated by the wide Atlantic yet on both sides of the ocean, each remembering the close relationship betwixt them of kith and kin.

When the Scottish Gael found a lodgement in Canada, the songs of his race were not forgotten. That body of song was the common heritage of the Kelt, the world over, but the soul of song did not live on the poetry of the past only; it found its muse in the dense forest, on the rivers and lakes, and at the happy firesides of the settlements. Here in Canada, therefore, Gaelic poems and songs were composed in the style of the older minstrelsy. Some of them can be compared to the popular lyrics of the Highlands. The themes varied with the glories of sea and land, the beauties of nature with her rich colourings and varying moods; the heroism and devotion of the women—of mothers and daughters who bore the hardships of colonization with

courage and good cheer; the merriment of the home life, for alongside the hardships were situations which gave play to the lively wit and fancy of the buoyant Kelt, and these as well as the loves of the swains and maidens furnished rich material to the bard. Every settlement had its poets, and the connection between the life and the lyrics of the people was well maintained. Thus, the labours of the day were lightened by song, in the melodious speech of the fathers; the idea of exile was softened and the land of adoption became more and more a real home like the native land. But that native land was not forgotten, and "MacCrimmon's Lament," or the "Emigrant's Farewell" had still the power of awakening memories of the past:

"Is tric mi cuimhneach air tìr mo dhùthchais,
Air tìr nam beanntan 's nan gleanntan ùrar;
Air tìr nan sgàrnaichean àrda, ruigte,
Nan creagan corrach, 's nan lochan dùghorm."

TRANSLATED:—

"Dear land of my fathers, my home in the Highlands,
'Tis oft that I think on thy bonnie green glens,
Thy far-gleaming lochs, and the sheer sided corries,
Thy dark-frowning cliffs, and thy glory of Bens!"

Or,—

"Is toigh leam a Ghaidhlig, a bardachd 's a ceòl,
Is tric 'thog i nìos sinn 'n uair bhiodhmaid fo leòn;
'S i dh' ionnsaich sinn tra ann an Ialthean ar n-òig,
'S nach fag sinn gu bràth gus an Iaidh sinn fo'n fhòid."

TRANSLATED:—

"And the songs of the Gael on their pinions of fire,
How oft have they lifted my heart from the mire;
On the lap of my mother I hlep'd them to God;
Let them float round my grave, when I sleep 'neath the sod."

By the Restigouche or the St. Lawrence the peasant-poet sat and mused upon the days of yore, and to the gathering neighbours poured an oblation to the manes of his forefathers, such as the beautiful "Canadian Boat Song," said to have been translated from the Gaelic by Earl Eglinton:—

TRANSLATED:—

"Listen to me as when ye heard our father,
Sing long ago the songs of other shores;
Listen to me and then in chorus gather,
All your deep voices as ye pull your oars—

Chorus.

Fair these broad meads, these hoary woods are grand,
But we are exiles from our father's land.

From the lone shelling of the misty island,
Mountains divide us and the waste of seas;
But still the blood is strong, our hearts are Highland
And we in dreams behold the Hebrides.

We ne'er shall tread the fancy-haunted valley,
Where, 'twixt the dark hills, creeps the small clear stream,
In arms around the patriarch banner rally,
Nor see the moon on royal tombstones gleam.

When the bold kindred, in the time long vanish'd,
Conquered the soil and fortified the keep,
No seer foretold the children should be banished,
That a degenerate lord might boast his sheep.

Come foreign rage! let discord burst in slaughter,
Oh! then, for clansmen true, and keen claymore!
The hearts that would have given their blood like water,
Beat heavily beyond the Atlantic's roar.

Fair these broad meads — those hoary woods are grand.
But we are exiles from our father's land.

There is doubt as to the authorship of this translation, some attributing it to Professor James Wilson; others to Hugh, 12th Earl Eglinton, among whose papers it was found. In March, 1896, I advertised in the Glengarry newspapers for the original and received in reply five Gaelic songs purporting to be the original of the Canadian Boat Song, but I could not accept any of them as being genuinely such. It is curious that Moore's Canadian Boat Song should also have been a translation from an old French song, popular in Poitou, according to Ernest Gagnon, Quebec.

Railing at his hard lot, a pioneer poet breaks out:

"Gach ceum a shiubhas sinn feadh na duth'chsa,
Gur coille duth-ghorm l air fad,
Tha ruith gu siorraidh gun cheann no crìoch oir',
Is beachainn fiadhaich tha innte gu pallt';
Cha'n fhaic sinn fraoch ann a fas air aonach,
Na sruth a caochan ruith soilleir gian,
Ach buig 'us geoban 's na rathadan mora
Na'n siuichd mhi-chomhnard le stumpan groid."

Fifty years later, however, this same poet casting his eye back, finds his muse is more cheerful. The log-houses are disappearing, so are the dense forests, the fauna is less formidable, the roads are improved, the fields are beautiful, and if the heather and the golden broom are not seen on the sloping foot hills, the verdure is at least luxuriant and pleasant to the eye; and he feels no compunction in placing the new in favourable contrast with the old.

The Gael is intensely religious. He turns to verse for adequate utterance when profoundly stirred with sacred thoughts. At the time of the first emigration to Canada, Dugald Buchanan, the greatest religious poet of the race, flourished. His spiritual songs were seized with remarkable avidity and were known in every cottage in the land. Seldom have religious verse in any language had such extensive circulation. Next to Holy Writ the early emigrant prized Buchanan, and many a log-cabin in the bush, rang, on Sabbath-day, with the chorus of his hymns. Canadian editions were printed, and they are still in use by some who could not tell whether the author had lived in the eighteenth (as he did) or in the nineteenth century, or whether he was a native of Canada or of Perthshire, so thoroughly have these hymns become a part of the Canadian Gaelic folk-song. Buchanan chose subjects which gave scope to his powerful imagination. For instance: "The Greatness of God," "The Sufferings of Christ," "The Day of Judgment," "The Skull," "Prayer," etc. He was known among the literary men of his time as a great poet. An account of an interesting interview between him and David Hume, the historian, has come down. These two were discussing the merits of some authors when Hume observed that it was impossible to imagine anything more sublime than the following lines, which he repeated:

"The cloud-capt towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherits shall dissolve,
And like the baseless fabric of a vision —
Leave not a wreck behind."

Buchanan admitted the beauty and sublimity of the lines, but, said, he could produce a passage more sublime, and repeated the following verses:

"And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there were found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God: and the books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them; and they were judged every man according to the works."

Hume, it is said, admitted the superiority of Buchanan's quotation, as an example of the sublime in literature.

After Buchanan came Patrick Grant, a sweeter, if a weaker poet. Grant's hymns have, from the time of their first appearance, been widely known and popular in Canada and are still read with pleasure and

profit in the Gaelic settlements. One or two examples will show the bright spirit that pervaded them—a contrast to Buchanan's sombre earnestness:

TRANSLATED:—

- (1) "Hark! Slon loud *rings* her King's high praises,
 She *sings* and raises her voice,
 His love to proclaim who *came* to aid her,
 His *name*, who made her his choice.
 Hallelujahs *prolong* the song that's given,
 Among wide Heaven's bright host,
 And those who while here, lies *near* to Jesus
 That *dear* sound pleases them most."

These lines may also serve as an example of that assonance which is characteristic of Gaelic versification,— the "leonine rhyme."

TRANSLATED:—

- (2) "In ilka triall we hae tae bear
 We'll nestle near him, there's shelter there,
 For if we trust Him, whate'er betide us,
 He'll save and guide us for ever mair.
 His frien's on earth He will ne'er disclaim,
 But bring wi' joy a' that loe his name,
 Frae His dear presence nae mair tae sever,
 But share for ever His Lasting Hame."

The year 1786 witnessed the arrival in Canada of a man of note, whose life-work will not be forgotten among the Gael. Rev. Dr. James Macgregor, the Gaelic Hymnist was born in 1759, at Portmore, in Perthshire. He settled at Pictou as a missionary, and preached in Gaelic to the Highlanders. A talented and scholarly divine, he composed hymns and religious poems which became popular among the Highlanders of Nova Scotia and Cape Breton. They were sung in almost every family, and the testimony of the early ministers of the Gospel in the Maritime provinces is to the effect that these poems made a deep impression on the people. While known, they were not widely used in Upper Canada, at least, I have not been able to trace them much beyond the manse of the Gaelic speaking clergymen of Ontario, but MacGregor's collection sold well in Scotland and in Nova Scotia. In the west Rev. F. J. MacLeod published a book of hymns and spiritual songs, at Toronto, which found acceptance among the Kelts of northern and western Ontario—Victoria, Grey and Bruce counties. A poet better known than Mr MacLeod, was the Rev. Donald Monro, whose volume of Gaelic verses appeared in 1848, with an encouraging list of subscribers. Mr. Monro was a native of Kilmartin, Argyllshire, and settled in Glengarry in the forties, removing thence to the township of Finch where he enjoyed a lengthened ministry. He died in

February, 1867, in the 78th year of his age, but still lives in the well gotten up volume of Gaelic poetry which he gave to his countrymen.

The popular songs of the people, however, must be their love songs, and in this branch of the subject the Kelto-Canadian had a rich treasury. As the French-Canadian inherited the folk-song of Old France, so the Gael of Canada did the songs of the Scottish Highlands. Love songs live long. To-day can be heard songs crooned in Nova Scotia or in Ontario, whose origin is lost in the mists of time, or of authors who lived many generations ago in Scotland. Such a song, for instance, is "Fear a Bhata," "The Boatman," one of the finest of our Gaelic love songs:

TRANSLATED:—

"My friends oft tell me that I must sever
All thought of thee from my heart for ever;
Their words are idle—my passion's swelling,
Untamed as ocean, can brook no quelling.

My heart is weary with ceaseless walling,
Like wounded swan when her strength is falling,
Her notes of anguish the lake awaken,
By all her comrades at last forsaken.

Another example would be: "Ho ro mo nighean donn bhoidheach," sung by a chorus of children in Toronto not later than last June. The translation of a verse will show the intensity of the sentiment pervading it:

TRANSLATED:—

"O maid whose face is fairest,
The beauty that thou bearest,
Thy witching smile the rarest,
Are ever with me.

"Though far from thee I'm ranging
My love is not estranging,
My heart is still unchanging
And aye true to thee.

"Thy smile is brightest, purest,
Best, kindest, demurest,
With which thou still allurest
My heart's love to thee."

But the settlers themselves and their descendants to the present time composed love songs which obtained popular recognition, many of which have seen the light of the day on pages of books or periodicals, but many, very many, still remain to be collected and preserved as interesting specimens of the Gaelic muse in Canada.

Some of the better known Gaelic poets of Canada are: Dr. James Macgregor, Rev. D. B. Blair, Rev. A. MacLean Sinclair, Evan MacColl,

Rev. Donald Monro, Rev. F. J. MacLeod, Hugh MacColl, Archibald MacKillop, A. Gordon, Alexander MacMillan, Hugh MacCorquodale, Neil Clark, Mrs. Angus MacKay, Mrs. McKenzie, Dr. J. MacLeod, Donald Grant, Donald Campbell, D. MacFarlane, Angus Carmichael (author of "Venus of the Gae," etc.), James MacMaster, Miss Catherine Cameron, Mrs. John MacDonald.

Quite recently, while on a visit in the county of Bruce, I came across a number of Gaelic songs composed by Mr. J. B. Macdonald, a respected citizen of Tiverton, a specimen verse of which I shall transcribe to show that patriotism and vitality still characterize the sons of Ossian:

O, 's ann a'n America a tha mi an dràsda,
 Fo dhùbhar na colie nach teirig gu bràth,—
 'S'n uair dh' fhaibhas an dàbhlachd 'sa thionnd'as am biàths
 Bidh drisean 'us bìulan 's fiùth'r orra fàs.

Ach's truagh nach robh mise 'n Tìridh mar bha,
 Ged bhithinn gun sgìlinn dar ruiginn an traigh;
 Bu shunndach a bhithinn 'n uair dh' eireadh an iàn,
 Do! a dh' iarraidh nan sìolag gu tochdar traigh-bhaigh.

Tìridh mo chridhe, Tìridh mo ghaoil,
 Far am bithinn am mireag 'sa ruith air an raon',
 'S bho 'na thug mi mo chùl ris do dhuthaich nan craobh,
 'S e dh' fhag mi fo mhulad nach grunnaich mi 'n caol.

The Gael had his "Golden Age," and it was an age of poetry. Its traditions have floated down the centuries to our own times, and are met with in popular songs, one of which may fitly close this sketch:

"LINN AN AIGH"—"THE HAPPY AGE."

TRANSLATED:—

When all the birds in Gaelic sang,
 Milk lay like dew upon the sea;
 The heather into honey sprang,
 And everything was good and free.

No tax or tribute used to fall
 On honest men, nor any rent;
 To hunt and fish was free to all,
 And timber without price or stent.

There was no discord, war or strife,
 For none were wronged and none oppressed;
 But everyone just led the life
 And did the thing that pleased him best.

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All lived in peace, there was no sort
Of prey or plunder, feud or fight;
There was no need of any court —
Their hearts contained the law of right.

For gold or silver no one cared,
Yet want and woe were never near;
All had enough, and richly fared,
And none desired his neighbour's gear.

Love, pity, and good-will were spread
Among the people everywhere;
From where the morning rises red
To where the evening shineth fair,
When all the birds in Gaelic sang.