

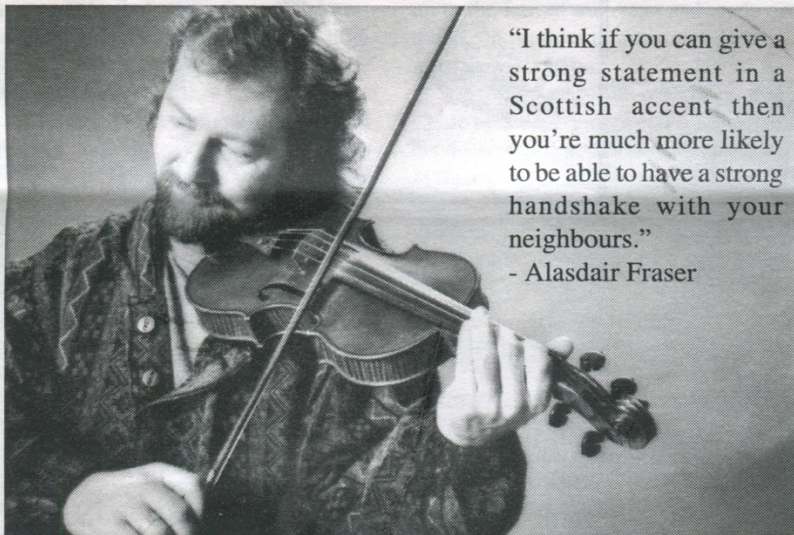
Missionary Work

Bringing Scottish Music to America

By Alan McIntosh Brown

Jean Redpath is known in the United States as the First Lady of Scots Folksong and has been described in her native land – surely the ultimate compliment? – as having “the finest voice in Scottish song.”

The Boston Globe described Alasdair Fraser as playing “with a cleverness, almost sassiness, that had people cheering and dancing in their seats,” while his performance, according to the Los Angeles Times’ critic, “ran the expressive gamut from deep Celtic melancholy to joyful jig, his fiddle imitations of the bagpipe almost unbelievable, the whole rendered with a humble sincerity, flawless virtuosity and just about the sweetest violin sound since Fritz Kreisler.”



Alasdair Fraser (Photo Courtesy of Culburnie Records)

“I think if you can give a strong statement in a Scottish accent then you’re much more likely to be able to have a strong handshake with your neighbours.”

- Alasdair Fraser

They are domiciled in the United States but both make frequent visits back to Scotland. With Jean having been a resident for some thirty-six years - now in Florida - and Alasdair having lived in California in the Sierras since 1981, they are in the ideal position to explain the difficulties facing the musical missionary.

Alasdair’s upbringing in Clackmannan, in Scotland’s smallest county, coloured his musical viewpoint. “My father’s a piper and my granddad was a fiddle player and a founding member of the Strathspey & Reel Society,” he says, “and I was very lucky, I think, because I had violin lessons at school from a great old teacher called Willie Fernie. That was fine, but I’d come home and do my wee bit practising of whatever it was, scales or Mozart or whatever, and my folks would say: that’s great, but let’s play ‘Rowan Tree’, let’s play some Scottish tunes. So I had both things going on at the same time.”

And part of Alasdair’s philosophy to this day is pointing out the differences between the classical music tradition and the Scottish music tradition. “You learn each one in a very different way,” he says. “The classical tradition tends to be very bookish and you learn from a book and you read the music, whereas the music of Scotland tends to be an oral tradition and the only way you’re ever going to learn that is by listening.”

“You don’t get it from written music. That’s why a lot of classical players have problems when they try to play traditional music because they’re looking in the wrong place. So I feel lucky that I had both angles of attack.”

And he points out another influence on his style. “I was always involved in the Gaelic scene, my folks being from the Inverness area. My granddad was a native Gaelic speaker, so I grew up with the songs and I used to play in the local Mods and all that and played with the singers.”

Alasdair took a degree in physics at Edinburgh University and worked with British Petroleum as a petrophysicist. His work took him to California in 1981 but he is at pains to point out that engineering was what he did for a living, not what he did, and he became a full-time musician four years later. But how did he develop his strong musical views?

“As I was growing up in Scotland I got this feeling that I was musically trapped. There are ten Scots will tell you you’re wrong for every one who tells you you’re doing it right, and there’s a tendency for folks to say: it’s not that way in the book, you can’t do it. That kind of thing comes out of fear – a fear of taking a risk and letting the music live and rein-

vent itself.”

“There’s a fear of that in Scotland which is hopefully now reversed. But at that time I knew there was something wrong because I was trying to burst out and couldn’t see where to go.” It turned out that Cape Breton was the missing link.

“I was living in California and - as I do sometimes - I get ideas on a whim. I’d heard this group called the Cape Breton Symphony and I thought they were great - driving rhythm, great old tunes and they’re not even Scottish - what is this Cape Breton place?”

“So I asked for time off my job and bought a ticket and thought I’d fly to Cape Breton and find out what was going on and for some reason I put on a kilt and a pair of running shoes. I turned up dressed like that and carrying a fiddle and I was standing at Halifax Airport by

the luggage carousel waiting for my rucksack when this chap came up to me.”

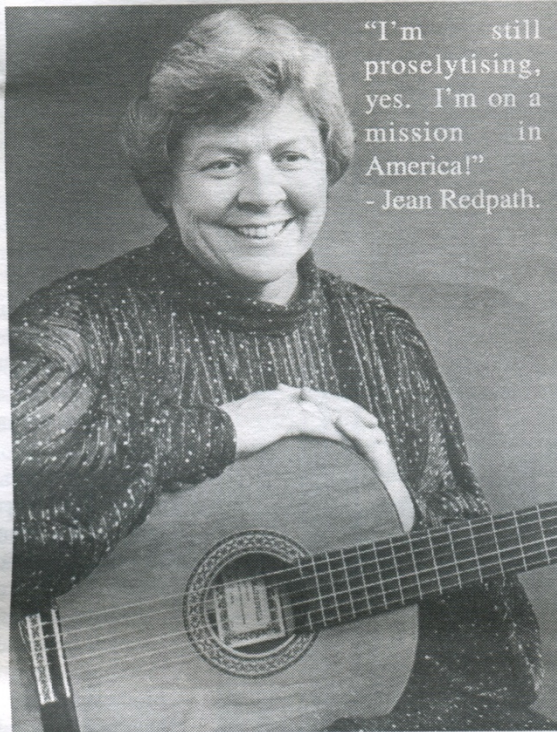
“He said: ‘You play the fiddle?’ I said I did and he said: ‘What kind of music do you play?’ I’m just standing there minding my own business, you know, and he’s asking me these questions. So I said I played Scottish music and he said: ‘Well, what are you doing here?’ And I said I’d come to find this group called the Cape Breton Symphony.”

“‘Oh you have?’ says he, ‘Well I’m in that group and not only that, we’re all standing here next to you waiting for our suitcases.’”

“They’d just flown in from Toronto and actually they’d been talking about me, kind of laughing, saying: who’s that with the kilt and the running shoes and the fiddle? So I met them all and, of course, the natural consequence of that was I went

to the concert they were about to give in Bridgewater, Nova Scotia and ended up on stage with them and we hit it off.”

“That was the beginning of a whole



“I’m still
proselytising,
yes. I’m on a
mission in
America!”
- Jean Redpath.

Jean Redpath (Photo Courtesy of Steorra)

new chapter. To me it was the very thing I needed. I felt like I’d found the missing link in a way. So much of Scotland’s culture has been oppressed by the church and this whole sordid Scottish history - especially in the Highlands - has taken a good stab at wiping out a lot of the culture, so wee pockets like Cape Breton have done a lot to preserve it.”

Jean’s reason for emigrating was also connected with employment, but the circumstances were very different. “When I emigrated I went to the family of a friend from University,” she says. “She wrote and said ‘I’m getting married, could you come and sing at the wedding?’ I wrote back and said ‘Happy to; will you sponsor my emigration?’ So it was as cavalier as that.”

“I had no intention of moving permanently but, as you know, it’s difficult

to get a job unless you live there.” So, rather than get a three-month permit, she emigrated with the idea of staying for three or four years. “I landed in Philadelphia with a suitcase full of summer clothes in September and found there were no jobs.”

Then came an offer to sing in New York. “I had no real intention of suddenly taking to the boards and becoming a professional singer, but the offer was exciting and well paid - I mean, \$175 a week in 1961 was a lot of money. I was making a dollar an hour taking in stairs to scrub at that point, so it seemed like a good thing to do.”

Having traveled the overseas route on their musical journeys, both chose the medium of the Summer School to spread their gospel. Jean was one of the first artists-in-residence at the event pioneered by Dr. Robert Innes at Stirling University. It was one of a kind apart from the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society School at St. Andrews. Jean points out that next year it celebrates its twentieth anniversary but there’s been an eight-year gap for her. “I took a year’s sabbatical in 1989 and it’s kind of got out of hand,” she says. But she was back this year.

“It was interesting to me this year that the enrollment was all Scots. When I quit, the class was considerably bigger but we were about sixty-per-cent American. That - although it made for a very lively group - was difficult to work with because you were working with a foreign language for more than half of the class.”

“Americans do tend to offer opinions rather more readily than Scots do.” She hastens to explain. “That’s not a put-down, it’s just a fact. American students are expected to talk and even yet I find that Scots don’t really offer an opinion unless they’re very sure of their ground, or would prefer you just to talk to them. This doesn’t come too difficult for me, but I would like a dialogue rather than a monologue; I mean I know what I’m going to say.”

Alasdair was similarly driven. “The Valley of the Moon is a Summer School, which has now been going for 14 years, and it basically reflects my journey in this

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Missionary Work (cont'd from pg 11) music," he says. Ask him to state its philosophy and he comes up with questions. "Where does it go, what influences have there been on Scottish fiddle and what influences could there be that we haven't yet examined?" he states.

He also runs a Summer School in Scotland on the Isle of Skye. "They've both the same philosophy. I saw it written down once about a violinist wanting to teach jazz. A lot of violinists are scared to play something that isn't classical music because it's not written down. The same happens in traditional music sometimes. So this teacher said: 'What will happen if you play a note that isn't on your music? Will you die?'"

"And some of that is what we teach, just to get people to take a flying leap off their fiddle and make up a variation to a tune or they'll even end up making up tunes."

With Jean having performed on both sides of the Atlantic, she knows how her audiences differ. "Since I'm now working on a concert circuit rather than a club circuit, I'm not automatically preaching to the converted," she says. "So one of the things that has occasioned a good deal of change in my presentation is the fact that if you're not working in a folk club you can't assume a certain amount of knowledge and a certain amount of listening time on the part of your audience."

"To stand up and sing a range of material anywhere from classic ballads through bothy ballads through lyric songs through contemporary songs without any kind of explanation is not on," she says. "So I've developed this – I suppose it's almost a trademark at this point – of doing a fair amount of talking. That's probably the biggest change between working in Scotland and working in America."

But, she says, the international differences are never a barrier. "I'm very strongly convinced that no matter whether it be totally traditional material or not, music is the universal language. If you just present it the right way the hundred percent will find something – well, there may be a two percent soreheads in there somewhere, there are in any group – but I would think nearly everybody would

find something to respond to."

So is she still undertaking missionary work? She laughs. "I'm still proselytizing, yes. I'm on a mission in America!"

As a resident in the United States for some thirty-six years, has she seen a change in the way Scotland is represented in America? "I hope so. I hope there's been some small change, because that's largely what I've been about – to indicate that there's a wee bit more about the country than tartan treasures and my granny's Heilan' hame."

"Talking of maturing, I will say that I was a good deal less diplomatic in early years in dealing with the requests for 'I Belong to Glasgow' and – God help us – 'Danny Boy'. It's very difficult to fight a country that has such strong visual images. I mean it's also part of the thing that we use as, if you like, advertising, to encourage tourists to come."

Which leads us to the vexed question of the Highland Games circuit, which she avoids. She has strong views on this. "The whole notion of a pipe band or a man in full Highland regalia is very stirring, very romantic, has enormous visual impact and the fact that you don't see that many men wandering around in the kilt has nothing to do with anything."

"My watchword for the moment is Expectations. People go there with certain expectations and I know perfectly well that I wouldn't fill them, which means if there's something I'm trying to sell them, I should choose a much more sympathetic place to sell it. I've been swimming upstream for a long time anyway but there's no point in taking any more waterfalls than you have to."

How would Alasdair sum up his feelings? "Because I'm a fiddler I relate it to the fiddle but it actually applies to anything. Through my teaching over the years I find that I've become an amateur philosopher as well, because by taking a leap off your fiddle and putting yourself in a situation where you have to become a creative artist, what you're doing is struggling to find your own voice. And not only find your own voice but then make some kind of statement ... and in a Scottish accent."

"I think that's very important because it's part of who you are and of knowing who you are. I think if you can give a strong statement in a Scottish accent then you're much more likely to be able to have a strong handshake with your neighbours."

"So that's kind of my philosophy and it gets into politics and life – the whole thing – but it's all headed up by the music. A country's health and it's people's health is very affected by their culture and by the ability of folk just to sit down and sing their own songs and get together and have a ceilidh and not to be scared, and not having to drink fifteen pints before you can sing your song."

"That kind of thing was sadly lacking in Scotland," he says. "But there's a beautiful reversal going on just now."

Meanwhile, there is more converting to be done. In each case there is an audience waiting eagerly to hear the philosophy of the singer and the fiddler, both masters of their art and both ready as ever to carry on the fight for the recognition of what they see as the true music of their native country.

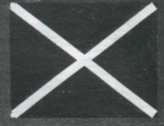
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Some Scottish Highland Games Facts...

There are more than 500 active Highland Games or Celtic Festivals in the world. The most active month of the year is July with 89 different events around the world from the Glenrothes Highland Games in Glenrothes, Scotland to Manitoba Highland Gathering in Manitoba, Canada, to the venerable Grandfather Mountain Highland Games near Linville, North Carolina. The largest Highland Games in the world is the Celtic Classic Highland Games & Festival in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Some estimates have put the attendance in the range of 150,000. The event lasts three days in September and is held all over downtown Bethlehem.



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OUR MISSION

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ON THE COVER

On the Cover: The members of Seven Nations: (left to right) Neil Anderson, Kirk McLeod, Ashton Geoghagan, and Struby. (Photo by Mathew John, Courtesy of Post No Bills).