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Parody, satire and intertextuality in the songs of *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black Black Oil*

Ian Brown and Sim Innes

Introduction

This article considers a key text, John McGrath's *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black Black Oil* (1973), the first production of 7:84 (Scotland) Theatre Company. *The Cheviot* is surely the most influential Scottish radical play of the 1970s – and, arguably, since – and songs fulfil a key role in its dramatic form and impact. Other Scottish playwrights like Hector MacMillan, Ian Brown and Stewart Conn did use satirical songs in plays in the 1970s, but their use was intermittent, examples including MacMillan's *The Rising* (1973), Brown's *Carnegie* (1973) or Conn's *Thistlewood* (1975), while the plays presented by 7:84 (Scotland) and its later offshoot Wildcat Theatre Company followed very much the example of *The Cheviot* in embedding songs in the dramatic text. Given the impact of McGrath's play it has been possible, of course, from time to time to find an arguably overstated role for it in Scottish theatre. Nadine Holdsworth, for example has noted that the 'production was a massive success and widely credited with redefining the nature of Scottish theatre's subject matter, aesthetics, context of production and modes of reception' (Holdsworth 2005a: 26).

Holdsworth's own reticence about this claim is, of course, sound. As Ian Brown has observed, McGrath himself 'was clearly conscious of working with, and within, a well-established Scottish performance tradition, one used to crossing generic [... and] ideological boundaries' (Brown 2013: 171). Trish Reid reinforces this perspective with regard to popular forms when she argues:

[...] as well as being profoundly vernacular, Scottish music hall and pantomime featured iconoclastic, interactive styles of performance, incorporating songs, sketches and material specifically reflecting Scottish working-class life and urban experience [...]

The combined power of these traditions, and particularly, the intensity of their relationship with the popular audience, was to influence Scottish theatre making throughout the twentieth century, especially among companies and groups with progressive left-wing agendas. (Reid 2013: 42-3)

In fact, rather than initiating new theatrical subject matter, aesthetics, context of production or modes of reception, McGrath brought already existing ones to a particular and fresh level of achievement, drawing on performers used both to music hall and pantomime and to the cèilidh and folk traditions. In this, his use of embedded songs with music selected from popular airs of the time can be seen to derive ultimately from the tradition of the ballad-opera.¹ Allan Ramsay's *The Gentle Shepherd* (1725-9), clearly political in its Jacobite sympathies, marks an early Scottish example. Such an early example had over the centuries a continuing influence in Scottish theatre, particularly, it seems, on the use of song in plays of the trilingual Gaelic/Scots/English-language playwright Archibald Maclaren (1755-1826) like his anti-slavery *The Negro Slaves* (1799) and in the various adaptations of Walter Scott's work which constitute the bulk of the nineteenth-century Scottish 'National Drama' where, again, popular airs were regularly used.²

Another early example, John Gay's anti-Walpole ballad-opera *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), inspired Brecht's twentieth-century satire on political corruption *The Threepenny Opera* (1928). Brecht's revisiting of the radicalism of Gay can be seen as pioneering a twentieth-century version of subversive intertextual music theatre. His influence was important on the development of the work of Joan Littlewood and her first artistic collaborator, the playwright-

singer Ewan MacColl, Manchester-born, but, a child of expatriate Scots, self-defined as Scottish (Warden 2011). MacColl was to go on between 1958 and 1964 to work with his later partner Peggy Seeger and producer Charles Parker to create his radical radio ballads. These developed and explored a ballad documentary form, using many of MacColl's own original songs – some now folk 'classics' – and the voices of the workers, including fishermen, miners, lorry-drivers and travellers, about whom the programmes were concerned. Littlewood herself led the devising, within this tradition, of *Oh, What a Lovely War!* (1963), its use of song, dramatic scenes and narrative highlighting the futility and pity of war. Other later twentieth-century European and American playwrights and directors followed Brecht's example, including Peter Weiss with his *Song of the Lusitanian Bogey* (1967) and Ellen Stewart of New York's La MaMa Theatre in a variety of 1960s and 1970s plays by her resident playwright Paul Foster.

The influence of such European and American theatre artists' exploration of political and radical music theatre and that of English-based peers interested playwrights in Scotland at the beginning of the modern so-called Scottish theatrical renaissance, usually seen as beginning between 1963 and 1973. In that period, the work of La MaMa was seen in Edinburgh on several occasions while the radicalism of Brecht, MacColl, Littlewood, Weiss, Stewart and Foster is important in understanding 1970s developments in Scottish playwrights' praxis, including the use of music in theatre. McGrath is explicit about his debt to, in particular, Littlewood:

Joan Littlewoods' tradition of using music in the theatre was very exciting, very exciting indeed [...] and later [the] *Oh What a Lovely War* tradition meant a tremendous amount to me. It got me very, very excited and connected with things in me. (Quoted in Winkler 1990: 290)

Older Scottish theatrical practices provided an environment which made such influences particularly welcome: Brown cites, among others, Maria DiCenzo, Femi Folorunso, Adrienne Scullion and Jean-Pierre Simard when he points out that 'A number of theatre historians have drawn attention to the deep roots of this hybridity and generic boundary-crossing in Scottish theatre' (Brown 2013: 40). The relationship to these roots was often explicitly recognised. Later in his career, McGrath produced *A Satire of the Four Estates* (1996), a consciously intertextual reference to the radical masterpiece of the earlier Scottish playwright, David Lyndsay, *Ane Satire of the Thrie Estaitis* (1552-54): he clearly consciously located his praxis in a centuries-old Scottish radical tradition. McGrath's work in *The Cheviot* draws on long-established Scottish theatre praxis.

Musical parody, *The Great Northern Welly Boot Show* and intertextuality

The Cheviot can also be seen to grow out of the work McGrath had seen and been involved in at the Liverpool Everyman in the early 1970s, discussed in detail in an important chapter by Ros Merkin (Merkin 2005: 25-38). In 1971, for example, McGrath wrote a play with music for the Everyman, *Soft or a Girl?* McGrath later described this as 'a Liverpool play with loads of songs and lots of comedy, lots of local involvement and a serious theme' (McGrath 1975: 48). In 2001 when he produced with Ksenija Horvat an 'Updated Checklist and Bibliography' (Horvat and McGrath 2001: n. p.), he described it as 'a rock comedy', a phrase he used in the original blurb for the play in 1971 when he described it as 'a rock-comedy with music written and played by PETTICOAT AND VINE the famous local folk and rock band' (quoted Holdsworth 2005a: 12). Holdsworth has described it as a 'Liverpool-based domestic drama in a rock concert format' (Holdsworth 2005b: 57-58) while Elizabeth MacLennan has called it a 'pop musical' (Capon 2005: 213). In the same interview MacLennan points out

The styles of music and the use of music, whether it be rock music or folk music or a *capella* music or parody or satirical use of well known songs, it's an essential part of his theatrical vocabulary. (Capon 2005: 213).

McGrath, then, used a wide variety of styles of music, but by and large, he did not mix musical styles within any one play. Rather, he employed whichever style – or, as we argue with regard to *The Cheviot*, whichever two contrasting styles – seemed appropriate to each play's topic and themes. Hence, the experiment of *Soft or a Girl?* used a rock or pop music format, while *The Cheviot* uses musical styles derived from what are represented dramaturgically, on the one hand, as the 'sincere' forms of Gaelic-language and folk-music traditions and, on the other, the 'insincere' forms of commercialised sentimental song. The authors have discussed elsewhere the ways in which McGrath employs 'sincere' Gaelic text to contradict English-language 'duplicitous' and the problematics of such a simple dichotomy (Brown and Innes 2012: 39 and *passim*). Randall Stevenson meanwhile highlights the complex implications of musical cross-reference and intertextuality when he identifies the 'sentimental nationalism of the song ['These are my mountains'] the audience join at the beginning'. At this point, however, it is worth noting that the lively music of this song, however sentimentally and commercially false its content, itself can be seen to resist the Highland 'lament syndrome' McGrath, according to Stevenson, has identified (Stevenson 2005: 76).

In fact two sentimental commercially-developed songs are represented explicitly in *The Cheviot* in parodied versions: 'These are my mountains' and 'Bonnie Dundee'. The technique used in parodying these two songs is prominent in a major Scottish production of the year before the première of *The Cheviot*. This was Tom Buchan and Billy Connolly's *The Great Northern Welly Boot Show* (1972). According to Elizabeth MacLennan, speaking at a 2002 Royal Holloway conference on McGrath's work, seeing this production influenced the team of founding members of 7:84 (Scotland). Indeed, in establishing the company in the next year, McGrath, Elizabeth and David MacLennan and Ferelith Lean recruited some of the *Welly Boot Show* cast, including Alex Norton, John Bett and Bill Paterson who, alongside Dolina MacLennan, a leading singer of both Gaelic and non-Gaelic traditional and radical folk-songs and an actor, performed in *The Cheviot*. Dolina MacLennan had been a key member of the 1950s Scottish Folk Revival inspired by Hamish Henderson and, in the 1960s, co-founder with Stuart MacGregor of the Heretics, a group of writers and singers based in Edinburgh who regularly presented 'live performances of poetry and short stories interspersed with traditional music, Gaelic songs and clarsach playing' (Green 2007: 88). Meantime, Norton, Bett and Paterson, who became stalwarts of several of 7:84's next shows, brought experience in playing Scottish variety, comedy and pantomime.

The *Welly Boot Show* influence was not uncritically accepted, however. Indeed, in 1990 Elizabeth MacLennan was severely critical of the play:

When we set out to establish a specifically Scottish company based in Scotland [... here] was theatre in which sexism was – and to a large extent still is – endemic and unashamed. The success of 1972, the most 'progressive' piece of new Scottish theatre was the *Great Northern Welly Boot Show*. It starred Billy Connolly in his most triumphant machismo anti-granny, anti-mammy, anti-wifey mode and our own Bill, Alex and John Bett in small parts enthusiastically within the same tradition. The women were definitely stereotypes and no two ways about it. The audience loved it. So while there was comedy, latent energy and class awareness in abundance, there were also problems that I was going to find hard to handle. Scottish theatre was, and remains in many respects, stubbornly male chauvinist. (MacLennan 1990: 43)

This is not the place to examine MacLennan's assertion of the 'endemic' sexism or 'stubborn' male chauvinism of Scottish theatre when she wrote in 1990. Certainly, as has been observed (for example, *passim* in Brown 2007), much of the focus of 1970s theatre in Scotland, despite the powerful impact of Joan Knight, the prominent director of Perth Theatre, was on west Central Belt, industrial, working-class men, often in somewhat sentimentalised or violent contexts. With the exception of a small number of plays by Ena Lamont Stewart, Joan Ure and Marcella Evaristi, women playwrights were absent. By the time MacLennan was writing in 1990, however, much had changed, not least in the impact throughout the 1980s of a generation of

women playwrights including Sue Glover, Liz Lochhead, Rona Munro, Jackie Kay, Sharman Macdonald and Anne Downie, not to mention the continuing impact of Knight and the highly influential directorship of Jenny Killick at the Traverse after her arrival in 1985. The central force of MacLennan's argument, nonetheless, is defensible. However attitudes to the role of women in theatre were changing north and south of the Border in the 1970s and however much the impact of women playwrights might be about to burgeon in Scotland after 1980, *The Great Northern Welly Boot Show*, while highly class-conscious and seen in its time as politically radical in its approach to unionised industrial politics, was substantially male chauvinist. It even managed somehow to shoe-horn into its plot a female stripper's act.

Despite its crass aspects, however, MacLennan is right that the *Welly Boot Show* had a particular impact, arising from its place in the wider politics of 1972. The 'show' was a dramatic response to the 1971 work-in by workers at Upper Clyde Shipbuilders, then faced with closure. The men's work-in inspired widespread support and for a time prevented specific shipyards being closed. The show metamorphosed the threatened workplace from a shipyard to a caricatured Wellington boot factory. First presented at the 1972 Clyde Fair International, a Glasgow festival of the early 1970s, it transferred to the Waverley Market in Edinburgh during that year's Edinburgh festivals. One factor helping create this popular success was its starring as union leader the former shipyard worker, Billy Connolly, then not only a highly popular folk-singer, but about to become a major stand-up comedian. His folk-singing experience influenced the music of the show, as did its musical director, the jazz musician, poet and, soon-to-be, playwright Tom McGrath. *The Welly Boot Show* employed a popular music format which handled its political themes through comedy and parody. At one point, for example, Connolly borrowed the music and verbal structure of a well-known radical folksong, made popular by Ewan MacColl in the 1960s, 'The Wark o the Weavers', celebrating the pride of weavers in their craft. Its chorus goes:³

*Gin it wisnae for the weavers whit wid we do
We wadnae hae claith made o oor woo
We widnae hae a coat, neither black or blue
If it wisnae for the wark o the weavers*

This song in Connolly's treatment, and fitted into the plot of the *Welly Boot Show*, celebrates the value of the work of the shipbuilders, encoded as welly-boot makers:

*If it wasnae for your wellies where would you be?
You'd be in the hospital or infirmary,
Cause you would have a dose of flu or even pleurisy,
If you didnae have your feet in your wellies!*

Where the original concerns the need everyone has for the weavers' product, the derivative song addresses wet-weather foot protection, although with some popular, not to say childish and even crass, humour concerning the smell of feet that have too long hidden in rubber boots or Wellington's value when walking in ordure. The final verse of the song is pointed at current politics:

*Noo Edward Heath and Wilson, they havnae made a hit,
They're ruining this country, mair than just a bit,
If they keep on the way they're goin, we'll all be in the shit,
So you'd better get your feet in your wellies.*

Heath and Wilson were then leaders of the Tory and Labour parties respectively, Heath, as Prime Minister, a particular target of the shipyard workers' wrath.

Like Buchan and Connolly in *The Great Northern Welly Boot Show*, McGrath appropriates established popular songs and adapts them to political effect. Throughout *The*

Cheviot, for example, McGrath parodies James Copeland's 'These are my mountains' in a way parallel to the *Welly Boot Show* use of 'The Wark o the Weavers'. Before he does so, however, *The Cheviot* begins, after some preliminary interaction of audience and cast, with both singing the original song which starts:

For these are my mountains
And this is my glen
The braes of my childhood
Will see me again
No land's ever claimed me
Though far I did roam
For these are my mountains
And I'm coming home (141-2).⁴

While, however, 'The Wark o the Weavers' is a folk song, this song is kitsch pastiche, written for the music hall stage. Its author, Copeland, was a successful actor (and father of another, James Cosmo). He was also a comic poet and songwriter. His song, though not explicitly comic, embodies a range of sentimental motifs about Scotland, its notoriously romantic mountains, exploiting the emotional sense of exile of the Scottish diaspora, or at least the wandering Scot.⁵ In a verse not used in the production the song's rather cynical exploitation of sentimental motifs and Scots lexis is even clearer:

The burn [stream] by the road sings at my going by
The whaup [curlew] overhead wings with welcoming cry
The loch where the scart [cormorant] flies at last I can see
It's here that my heart lies it's here I'll be free.

The song is, or at the time of the 1973 production was, highly popular, being sung among others by the Alexander Brothers, a variety act who specialised in tartanised false emotion. McGrath was, of course, fully aware of this, describing it as 'mid-twentieth-century Scottish schmaltz, pure schmaltz' (Winkler 1990, 295). This song is satirically adapted later in the play, but in its initial performance, in which the audience helped by a song sheet joins, it is presented straight, leaving the audience free to understand it either as 'sincere' song of homecoming or false sentiment, but arguably engaging the first interpretation as a foundation for its later subversion.

Parodies of the song reappear in *The Cheviot* to mark critical stages in the history of the appropriation and exploitation of the Highlands and the disempowerment of its people in various ways. When Harriet Beecher Stowe is introduced, praising the Duke of Sutherland's policies, the company acting as sheep drive her away, singing the words (159). The sheep's song take Copeland's original text for 'These are my mountains', which however emotionally over-wrought and schmaltzy, exploits the sense of emotional attachment, longing and belonging of a wanderer coming back home and introduces the recurring use of his song in various later parodies. The sheep have taken over the mountains from the people who cultivated them, but can yet chase off an apologist like Beecher Stowe. Later, when Highlanders are driven to seek a livelihood in the Canadian wilderness, hunting and trading furs, they are accosted by a French North West Trader and his Native American allies who threaten them with a tweaked quotation from the song: 'These – are my mountains, and you're going home' (162). When we see Queen Victoria arrive, bringing with her Balmorality and the conversion of the Highlands into a rich person's hunting reserve – the 'Stag' of the play's title – she sings a new version of the song, replacing 'my' with the royal plural, 'our':

These are our mountains
And this is our glen
The braes of your childhood
Are English again (169).

The sequence in which first the sheep and then anglicised nobility appropriate the Highlands is completed in the play when Texas Jim the oilman sings his version of the song:

For these are my mountains
And this is my glen
Yes, these are my mountains
I'll tell you again –
No land's ever claimed me
Though far I did roam
Yes these are my mountains
And I – have come home. (186)

Texas Jim, representing the take-over by international oil interests concludes his song by, according to a stage direction, firing a pistol as '*oil rigs appear on the mountains*' which make up the background, although later this article will discuss the extent to which such an image reflects reality.⁶

Another popular song adapted to the play's purposes is 'Bonnie Dundee', which brings to the performed text its own back story. The tune 'Bonny [*sic*] Dundee' is an old folk tune to which several lyrics have been set, usually related to the praise of the city of Dundee itself or the misbehaviour, usually sexual, of a young man from Dundee. In 1825 Walter Scott wrote lyrics to the tune which celebrated the royalist John Graham of Claverhouse, made Viscount Dundee in 1688 by the deposed James VII. Claverhouse led the first Jacobite Rising of 1689 in which he was killed, although victorious, at the Battle of Killiecrankie, so destroying any prospect of success for the rising. Scott imagined Dundee ('Clavers') speaking out against those members of a National Convention, in effect the Scottish Parliament, who would not resist the overthrow of the – in his view – rightful king:

To the Lords of Convention 'twas Clavers who spoke.
'Ere the King's crown shall fall there are crowns to be broke;
So let each Cavalier who loves honour and me,
Come follow the bonnet of Bonny Dundee.

This jolly tune, best known now to the words written by a Tory poet, novelist and propagandist, celebrating a royalist defending the Stuart monarchy's rights in 1688-9, becomes the setting for words describing the economic and cultural despoliation of the Highlands at the beginning of the nineteenth century to make way for sheep walks.

When in *The Cheviot* Patrick Sellar, the Duke of Sutherland's agent, outlines his view that 'The common people of Sutherland are a parcel of beggars with no stock, but cunning and lazy' (144), his colleague James Loch joins him in insulting the community and praising the business principles that underlay the Clearances. Their scene concludes when they bargain for the land on which the people live and work, while a fiddle quietly plays the tune of 'Bonnie Dundee'. A version of the song is then sung:

As the rain on the hillside comes in from the sea
All the blessings of life fall in showers from me
So if you'll abandon your old misery –
I will teach you the secrets of high industry:

Your barbarous customs, though they may be old
To civilised people hold horrors untold –
What value a culture that cannot be sold?
The price of a culture is counted in gold. (146)

A tune that is best known sung to Scott's words expressing loyalty to an old and traditional political culture is set to words that betray a whole culture. This is another example of the way that, throughout the play, recourse is made to well-known tunes to accompany satirical new song-texts, where a large part of the effect is in the disjunction between the tune's pre-existing referents and the words of the song. So, as Loch and Sellar strike the bargain that will launch the clearing of the people from their land, they sing a song entitled 'High Industry' to the tune of 'Bonnie Dundee', parodying Scott's words. There is, of course, a danger in a simple antithesis of industry and customs/culture of an implied – and patronising – stance, as if industry and Highland language and culture are somehow incompatible. The play's central concern is to expose the exploitative nature of predatory advanced capitalism, but one has to remain sensitive to the possibility, if one is not alert, of an implication that somehow what is being endorsed is leaving the Highlands alone in poverty since that is 'traditional'. Indeed, we will point later to the problematic nature of directly identifying oil industry developments with the earlier exploitation of the 'Highlands' by the breeding of sheep and deer.

The next example of adaptation of this kind is one where another well-known tune is used for a purpose that is not so much satirical in impact as drawing on a traditional tune's implied reference to an older conflict between Highland and Lowland power. The original celebrates the Battle of Harlaw of 1411 between the Highland forces of the MacDonald Lord of the Isles and those of the North-Eastern nobility on behalf of the Stewarts over control of Ross. That conflict was indecisive, but bloody (later called 'Red Harlaw'). The Highlanders withdrew and the Lowland power-brokers were victorious by default in a way exaggerated in the Child ballad 'The Battle of Harlaw'. The parody exploits the original's musical power as new words are set to the folk-tune recorded by the folklorist and poet Hamish Henderson in the 1950s from the famous Scots traveller and folk-singer Jeannie Robertson (for more on Robertson, see Porter and Gower 1995), while earlier published versions are found in Emily Lyle's *Scottish Ballads* (Lyle 1994: 44-47, 268).⁷ Elizabeth Hale Winkler appears to miss a key point about the choice of tune when she says

['The Battle of the Braes'] celebrates a victory of resistance to eviction in a comic heroic tone. The tune used is an old Scottish ballad melody, 'The Battle of Harlaw' (Child, no. 163), but aside from the basic idea of battle there seems to be no connection intended with the original text. (Winkler 1990: 297-8)

This heroic ballad tune is, in fact, a highly significant intertextual reference. In *The Cheviot* the tune is the setting for a song and section of the play about the 1882 Battle of the Braes (166-8). This conflict between the local tenants and their landlord, Lord MacDonald of Sleat, was of national significance and constitutes a key moment in the Crofters' War. The song in the *Cheviot* could be perceived as portraying MacDonald as an outsider with his demands of 'Invade the Isle of Skye' (168). Yet it must be remembered that Lord MacDonald was of Highland stock, with a castle at Armadale in Skye. This reminds us to resist a tendency in perception of the Highlands to imagine the region as some class-less Shangri-La when, of course, some of the Highlanders themselves were as guilty of predatory behaviour as any 'incoming' landlords.⁸

Here the use of an original tune for English words is not, as with the treatment of Copeland's or Scott's songs, in ironic counterpoint to the text, but draws, through its music, on the previous conflict, perceived as heroic, between Highland and Lowland authority to celebrate the Battle of the Braes. Interestingly, in his account of the setting of his text, McGrath appears, on the face of it, unaware of the depths of meaning embedded in the tune selected. He describes the process of preparing the song as follows:

I crept off into a corner of the disused discotheque we were working in, and wrote a ballad. Somebody saw a verse, came up with a tune. We all threw in ideas for the chorus. (McGrath 1981: x-xi)

This bland description of the creative process suggests McGrath was not fully aware of the powerful implicit resonances of the tune somebody 'came up with'. In fact, that 'somebody' was the company member, Dolina MacLennan, distinguished folk-singer and key member of the Scottish Folk Revival. She came up with all the folk tunes used in the play on the basis of her musical knowledge (personal communication, 10 January 2015). It is worth noting, as we explore the complexities and ironies of political exploitation of existing song texts and tunes, that the ballad 'The Battle of Harlaw' with its repeated reference to 'Hielanmen' portrays Lowland (North-East) versus Highland. However, in reality that conflict was more complex than 'Highland versus Lowland' since the Earl of Mar, who led the fight for the Stewarts against the MacDonald Lord of the Isles, was himself a product of Gaelic society, a Gaelic-speaker, while some Badenoch Gaelic kindreds fought on Mar's side at Harlaw (Brown 1996: 42-48).

Thus, here we have a complex nexus of intertextuality and cultural identities. The traditional 'Battle of Harlaw' exaggerates Lowland military success against the MacDonald-led Highlanders. The repurposing of 'Harlaw' by the *Cheviot* sees a victory for the tenant-class Highlanders of Skye against Lord MacDonald, who is forced 'in the interests of his own class, to come to a settlement in the Braes' (168). Any echoes of culturally-rich but materially-poor Highlander versus upper-class outsiders oversimplify the historical reality in both the original and the later version. However, the conflict embedded in the play's version of 'The Battle of Harlaw' continues. It is straight after this song that Victoria sings her version of 'These are our mountains', followed by a scene in which those who hunt the 'Stag' as 'Monarchs of the Glen' parade their power, singing of the joys of 'Shooting stags, my dear and grice ['grouse' –a parody of a strangulated aristocratic English accent]' and threatening:

And if the locals should complain,
Well we can clear them off again. (170-1)

The Cheviot and the Gaelic culture of resistance

At the end of this scene through the person of the hunting party's ghillie we are introduced explicitly to the songs of Mary MacPherson, represented as the ghillie's niece from Skye. Mary MacPherson or 'Màiri Mhòr nan Òran' ('Big Mary of the Songs') (1821-98) was a native of Skye who as an adult also lived in Inverness and Glasgow and was a radical Gaelic songwriter. She was heavily involved in the Land Agitation in the Highlands and even accompanied crofter MPs on tours. Lord Crask, who with Lady Phosphate of Runcorn is represented as a typical economic coloniser of the Highlands and having no idea what its language might say, introduces the next song: 'Oh Mary – bright little girl – always singing happily around the house, never understood a word she said'. To this, the ghillie replies, apparently deadpan, but surely ironically (though any irony may not be evident to a non Gaelic-speaking audience or non-reader of Gaelic-language literature), 'Aye, Mary MacPherson, happy as a linnie, sir' and Mary herself enter to sing her song 'Eilean a' Cheò' ('The Island of Mist' i.e. Skye). *The Cheviot* gives two non-consecutive verses and, as in some other cases of use of Gaelic text, no English translation:

Ged tha mo cheann air liathadh
le deuchainnean is bròn,
is grian mo lethcheud bliadhna
a' dol sìos fo na neòil,
Tha m'aigne air a lionadh
le iarratas ro-mhòr
Gum faicinn Eilean Sgiathach
Nan siantannan 's a' Cheò.

Although my head has greyed
with hardships and with woe,
and the sun of all my fifty years
is setting under clouds,
my spirit is now filled
with a very great desire
to see the Winged Island
of storms and misty sky.

Ach cò aig a bheil cluasan
No cridh' tha gluasad beò,

But who has ears to listen
or a heart that throbs with life

nach seinneadh leam an duan seo,
Mun truaigh' a thàinig oirn?
Na mìltean a chaidh fhuadach,
A' toirt uath' an cuid 's an còir,
A' smaointinn thar nan cuantan,
Gu Eilean uain' a' Cheò.

who would not sing this song with me
about our most piteous plight?
The thousands who have been banished,
having lost their lot and right,
whose thoughts now cross the oceans
to the green Island of the Mist.
(Gaelic text and English translation, Meek
2003: 366-75)

Clearly someone without Gaelic will not grasp the full irony of what Lord Crask says (his name, though derived from the name of a Sutherland hamlet, An Crasg, at the mouth of Strathnaver, a famous Clearances site, and an inn which is on high ground at the other end of Strathnaver,⁹ is almost 'Crass'). Yet, the singing would clearly engage even such audience members emotionally, while readers are guided by the stage direction in the published text, 'sings a very sad song' (173-4).

Lord Crask is not alone in being presented as an unsympathetic figure, ignorant of Highland culture and its chief language, Gaelic. *The Cheviot* lays – quite reasonably one might say – much of the blame for the depopulation and exploitation of the Highlands at the door of Highland aristocracy and its agents, whether in such historical figures as the Duke of Sutherland or fictionally satirised modern characters as Lord Vat of Glenlivet, 'a mad young laird' (177). Lord Vat on entering finds Andy McChuckemup, a 'Glasgow Property-operator's man' who is planning to set up such tourist features as 'The Crammem Inn, High Rise Motorcroft' and a 'wee ethnic bit, Fingal's Caff'. He says 'Get off my land – these are my mountains' and concludes by striking a bargain with Andy to sell his 'beloved' acres, repeating a final deal-making formula heard before between Sellar and Loch (146):

LORD VAT You're a hard man, Mr Chuckemup.
ANDY Cash.
LORD VAT Done.

Almost at once another Gaelic song is heard:

Haidh-o haidh rum
Chunna mis' a-raoir thu

Haidh-o haidh rum
I saw you last night

Dìreadh na staidhre anns a' Royal

Climbing the stairs in the Royal

Haidh-o-hu-o
Cha ghabh mis' an t-Uigeach

Haidh-o-hu-o
I won't take the man from Uig

Cha dèan e càil ach rùdhadh na mònach

He doesn't do a thing except stacking the peat

Haidh-o haidh rum
Cha ghabh mise Siarach

Haidh-o haidh rum
I won't take a Westsider

Cha dèan e càil ach biathadh nan othaisgean

He doesn't do a thing except feeding the ewes.

This *port à beul* known as 'Stocainnean Daoimean' ('Diamond Socks') is from the Isle of Lewis, as is Dolina MacLennan.¹⁰ The inclusion of this song, and arguably, a number of others, might be seen to reflect, in particular, twentieth-century Lewis song-culture, and not to be representative of culture across all of the Gàidhealtachd.¹¹ This is sung from the perspective of a woman detailing the various Lewis men she refuses to marry. The singing of the song is concluded by the MC's saying 'It's no good singing in Gaelic any more [...]' and outlining

measures to suppress Gaelic because 'English is the language of the Development Board, the Hydro Board, the Tourist Board, [...] and, I suppose, the Chicago Bridge Construction Company', so that 'The people who spoke Gaelic no longer owned their land' (180). Her independent agency as a woman becomes, in the linguistic contexts of the late twentieth century, potentially futile, given the existence of oppressive economic and social conditions.

Yet, no sooner has this modern defeatist reflection been made than the audience is reminded of the late nineteenth-century Land League struggles against exploitative landlords and the successful land occupations by returning soldiers after World War One who insisted on being given their land rights. The singer celebrates, in English, such resistance. In this song McGrath has repurposed Roddy McMillan's song 'I will go', which is itself a version of a Gaelic original known as 'Dùthaich MhicLeòid' (for the Gaelic song see Gillies 2005: 197-98). The Gaelic original is sung from the point of view of Highland soldiers fighting in the Napoleonic Wars, whereas McGrath's reworking of McMillan's version concludes with:

Oh the Laird
Had the law
And the police were his servants
But we'll fight
Once again
For this country is the people's
Yes we'll fight, once again (182).

No sooner, however, is this triumphant song sung than the new owners, in contrast, sing a new song:

We are the men
Who own your glen [...] (183)

These are absentee or neglectful landlords and the song mentions egregious examples of the time, including Doctor Green of Surrey and the Ministry of Defence. This sequence of song and speeches concludes with Texas Jim's version of 'These are my mountains', already referred to, which segues at once into the more generic sound of a hoe-down, as Jim sings of the exploitation of the region by the oil industry:

Take your oil rigs by the score,
Drill a little well just a little off-shore,
Pipe that oil in from the sea,
Pipe those profits – home to me. (186)

In respect to this song, it is worth noting that in fact the oil industry was not based in the Highlands in any real sense so that the mapping of sheep, deer, Clearances and oil exploitation as if on the same area, however dramatically effective, does not quite make historical – or even perhaps political – sense.

In Scotland the oil industry was, and is, an offshore business based on areas like Lowland Aberdeen and, of course, the Shetland Islands, although some oil rig building yards at the time of *The Cheviot* were planned or being developed in deep water sea lochs in Highland areas. In fact, the first oil was not piped ashore until 1975, two years after the première of *The Cheviot*, which was addressing – with prophetic insight, one might say – the initial phases of developments yet to mature. Texas Jim's song and much of the treatment of the 'Black Black Oil' pivots away from discussion of Highland history to North Sea oil almost seamlessly as if it is all the same place, as when Jim sings 'For the Highlands will be my lands in three or four years'. There is some potential recognition that we are now talking about a different geographical/cultural area by page 194 where we have the Gaelic singer say 'The West is next', but oil industry exploitation is generally represented as a successor, as the title implies, to

exploitation by the sheep and, then, deer-stalking industries. In making the perfectly accurate accusation that the British Government would allow North Sea Oil profits to flow out without the Norwegian practice of national participation in profits, an issue that was prominent in the 2014 independence referendum campaign, McGrath seems to conflate two, or even three, quite different regions, as if they were the same. It is almost, in the dialectics of the play, as if the 'real' danger about oil exploration is what it might mean for some mystical Gaelic culture that might be damaged. The scene containing 'drammies', Jimmy Shand and playing 'Amazing Grace' all seems to speak to an imagined future where Gaelic culture has disappeared and given way to kitsch Scottishness for outsiders. One would never deny the justice of McGrath's case about exploitation, but economic prosperity for parts of Highland Scotland might equally not have been entirely a bad thing. Arguably, one of the main reasons for decline of Gaelic and its culture in areas of the Highlands and Western Isles is the lack of economic opportunity for young people. Shetland, by comparison, has largely prospered as a result of North Sea Oil thanks to tough-minded local politicians who from the beginning dealt firmly with oil companies. There is, in fact, a tension in this section of the play around an apparent desire for North Sea Oil exploitation to be seen as a contemporary mirror of Highland Clearances for Gaelic Scotland without McGrath's having to deal with the inconvenient fact that most North Sea oil development was not in Gaelic Scotland. Yet, at the time he wrote, exploitation of deer forest there at the expense of local people still was (and arguably still is) rife.

One can see, however, that, in a loose sense, offshore oil industry exploitation can be argued metaphorically to follow that by sheep and deer in the Highlands. More, one understands McGrath's dramaturgical need to conjoin the three kinds of exploitation over time and he presents his dramatic critique of oil industry methods powerfully. As Elizabeth Hale Winkler notes,

'Hoe Down,' with American square dance music, is comic in its aggressive exaggeration and in its juxtaposition of incompatible cultural spheres. But it, too, becomes acutely menacing as Texas Jim 'gets more and more frenzied' and finally freaks out in a passion of greed and contempt:

I'll go home when I see fit
All I'll leave is a heap of shit.

The parody of an American square dance ends up illustrating the reality of cultural alienation in contemporary Scotland. Fun and shock effect are combined; the audience is warned not to let the entertainment lure them into an acceptance of the values represented. (Winkler 1990: 298)

Texas Jim then meets Whitehall, 'a worried senior Civil Servant' who lets Jim have North Sea Oil at bargain prices before they both return to the tune of 'Bonnie Dundee', used before by Loch and Sellar when clearing the land. This time they transform the words first used by Sellar and Loch (146) to a '*souped-up version*' of the tune:

As the rain on the hillside comes in from the sea
All the blessings of life fall in showers from me
So if you'd abandon your old misery –
Then you'll open your doors to the oil industry. (189).

The satirical use of well-known tunes for texts in English concludes when Lord Polwarth, a Scottish Office minister of the time, is attached to puppet strings by Jim and Whitehall to sing to the tune of 'The Lord of the Dance' a song with the chorus

Oil, oil, underneath the sea,
I am the Lord of the Oil said he,
And my friends in the Banks, and the trusts all agree,

I am the Lord of the Oil – Tee Hee (193).

The resources of the Highlands, as metaphorically extended by McGrath, have again been appropriated by outsiders.

The impact of music

Despite the many successors to *The Cheviot* in the repertoire of 7:84 and Wildcat, this play remains the primary text of its kind, one to which critics and historians return. Perhaps one reason for this is reflected in Randall Stevenson's observation:

History in McGrath's writing, was [...] more Brechtian, more analytic as well as being emotive in more structured ways [than, for example, in Hector MacMillan's *The Rising* (1973)]. In concentrating on the Highland clearances in the *Cheviot*, McGrath could hardly have fixed on a more emotive phase of Scottish history, yet the play's radical shifts between epochs and alienated performance style ensured that the emotions concerned could not be indulged only for their own sake, or as part of what McGrath called the 'lament syndrome' so often associated with the Highland past. (Stevenson 2005: 75-6)

Stevenson's insight is surely correct, and one of the key elements of the 'alienated performance style' is use of song in English and in Gaelic in *The Cheviot*. Yet, one of the aspects of study of *The Cheviot* that was until recently rather neglected is the provenance and role of songs, especially Gaelic song, in the play. This article, in exploring the themes it does, complements earlier work of its authors in exploring the play's use of Gaelic song-texts and its arguably flawed or incomplete understanding of Gaelic culture (Brown and Innes 2012).

While that 2012 article points to problematic aspects of McGrath's use of Gaelic material, it is clear that, besides the influences of Littlewood and Brecht, McGrath related his use of song in *The Cheviot* to cultural practices in the Highlands:

One truly popular form of entertainment in the Highlands, past and present is the ceilidh. [...] In the past, these gatherings had also had their political side, particularly at the time of the Land Leagues, and stories of Highland history and oppression had been passed on. In the West [Highlands], they were also one way of keeping intact the Gaelic culture – language, literature, songs and manners. 'Ceilidh parties' also go from place to place to entertain and be entertained, and are very popular. I wanted to keep this form – an assembly of songs, stories, scenes, talk, music and general entertainment – and to tell through it the story of what had happened and is now happening to the people. (McGrath 1981: x)

Indeed, such a combination of performance elements can be seen to accord with McGrath's own theorisation of popular or radical theatre in *A Good Night Out* (1981). There he identifies *passim* key differences between bourgeois and working-class audience in the latter's positive attitudes to directness of address, comedy, music, emotion, variety, immediacy, localism and sense of identity with the performers. He specifically identifies comedy and directness as crucial to the impact of *The Cheviot* (71), but one might argue that all the elements he identifies are key in that play, music (or song) being prominent among them. In *A Good Night Out*, he comments on such use of music:

standards of performance are demanded in music and many individuals in working-class audiences are highly critical and have high standards about the music in shows. But the music is enjoyable for itself, for emotional release, and for the neatness of expression of a good lyric, or a good tune. (McGrath 1996: 55)

Within four pages in the same volume, however, he notes a potential disadvantage of the use of music in drama, when he says 'Music can become mindlessness; emotion can become manipulative and can obscure judgement' (McGrath 1996: 59). Nonetheless, his fundamental position seems to be, as stated in an interview with Winkler:

We've used all kinds of music in 7:84. ... The two important features of it, one of which is obvious, is that we try to use music which connects with the audience's entertainment expectations in some way. But the other bit, which is not recognized nearly enough, is that we also try to take it on, and use that basic music to, in some way, challenge the audience. (Winkler 1990: 288-9)

Such an approach is one which, arguably, relates back beyond Littlewood to the pioneering work in the dramatic use of folk song and traditional music of her first partner Ewan MacColl and even, in a longer perspective, to the work of Allan Ramsay in *The Gentle Shepherd*. Certainly, according to Winkler,

McGrath warns against a sentimental, non-critical approach to music, even working-class collective music such as 'Red Flag' sing-alongs; [...] 'Music is dangerous because it can be so effective, even if its basic intellectual position is wrong. It worked in Nazi Germany very well. [...] one of the crucial things about [...] the kind of music which I really admire, like Theodorakis, or Kurt Weill, or Eisler, is the critical content. That they all use forms which are popular, which relate to what people can listen to and appreciate. ... But they all bring with them a kind of sensibility [...] and a critical awareness –... not always a politically critical ... often a musicologically critical awareness – to what they are doing, which makes the audience aware of the effect of the music.' (Winkler 1990: 289)

Nonetheless, despite McGrath's entirely understandable reservations, it can be seen from the arguments of this article and its 2012 complement that sardonic new words for well-known settings, musical celebrations of what victories for Highland culture there were and original Gaelic songs ensure that music drives the themes of *The Cheviot*. These themes include the conflict of Highland and other cultures, recurring economic exploitation of the Highlands and the social and political impact of that exploitation. The play concludes with the singing of two verses in Gaelic with an intervening translation into English of one of the songs of Màiri Mhòr nan Òran:

Remember you are a people and fight for your rights
[...]
By the strength of your hands and the hardness of your fists
[...] the exploiter will be driven out (199).

English and Gaelic text unite in this final song of defiance.

Clearly *The Cheviot* and the earlier *The Great Northern Welly Boot Show* respond to specific politico-economic challenges: in the latter case, the UCS work-in, the danger of job-loss and industrial collapse; in the former, the discovery and exploitation of North Sea Oil near regions that had over centuries suffered various kinds of economic depredation. Music accompanying songs in both drew on familiar tunes to draw the audience into revised words, creating surprise and reflection by emphasising the changes made in the original wording. This dramaturgical method allowed the ironic and subversive use of tunes to encourage alternative readings of both the music and the politics that underlay it. While the tendency in this strand of 1970s radical musical theatre-making was generally, as in *Soft or a Girl?*, to use pop or rock forms – a model attractive to McGrath in his later work for 7:84 (Scotland) and David MacLennan and David Anderson in its offshoot *Wildcat* – the parodic, satiric and intertextual approach in *The Cheviot* achieved results more subtle, rich and complex than at first sight might appear evident.

Within that complexity lies another layer. Although at times it seems as if McGrath is keen to pitch traditional Gaelic culture and advanced capitalism as polar opposites, it is clear that the exploitation under discussion is not only by outside forces, but also by Highlanders of other Highlanders. He also appears keen to draw a direct line between Gaelic and non-Gaelic, and from sheep to deer to oil. Of course, as has been pointed out, the underlying historical, geographical and economic reality is much more complex. Nonetheless, the music, choice of Gaelic song and use of intertextuality and parody help to push a polarised popular view of Highland history and current reality in a highly achieved dramatic landmark.

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¹ We are indebted to Dr Kirsteen McCue for reminding us of the importance of the use of popular airs in Scottish theatrical traditions.

² For Maclaren, see Gioia Angeletti, 'Debating Colonialism and Black Slavery on the Scottish Stage: Archibald Maclaren's *The Negro Slaves* (1799)' in Gioia Angeletti (ed.), *Emancipation, Liberation, and Freedom: Romantic Drama and Theatre in Britain 1760-1830* (Parma: Monte Università Parma, 2010), pp. 59-86, and Ian Brown, 'Public and Private Performance: 1650-1800' in Ian Brown (ed.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Drama* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 22-40, specifically pp 39-40. Brown follows up his interest in the relevant pages of *Scottish Theatre: Diversity, Language, Continuity* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013) and Brown and Angeletti do so in 'Cultural Crossings and Dilemmas in Archibald Maclaren's Playwriting' in Christopher MacLachlan and Ronald W Renton (eds), *Gael and Lowlander in Scottish Literature: Cross-currents in Scottish Writing in the Nineteenth Century* (Glasgow: Scottish Literature International, 2015), pp. 41-55.

For the National Drama, see Barbara Bell, 'The Nineteenth Century' in Bill Findlay (ed.), *A History of Scottish Theatre* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1998), pp. 137-206, esp. 143-80

³ This discussion of the adaptation of 'The Wark o the Weavers' and the subsequent discussion of the use made of 'These are my mountains...' draw on earlier discussion in Brown (2011).

⁴ Quotations are from John McGrath, *Six-pack: Plays for Scotland* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996).

⁵ These three sentences draw on Brown and Innes 2012: 31-32.

⁶ This discussion of these two adaptations of 'These are my mountains...' draws on Brown 2011: 169.

⁷ Robertson's version of the song can be listened to at *Tobar an Dualchais* site at <http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/25362/4>.

⁸ Part of this discussion is derived from Brown 2011: 170-1.

⁹ We are grateful to Dr Robert Irvine for drawing our attention to the location of An Crasg (Crask) in relation to Strathnaver.

¹⁰ A version of this song can be found in Comunn Gàidhealach Leòdhais (1982): 96-98.

¹¹ The authors are grateful to Dr Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart for drawing their attention to this point.