

Seeking Héloïse Russell-Fergusson

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Preamble

This paper comprises an updated version of the reading draft from the joint presentation given at the Musica Scotica conference held in Glasgow in 2015. In addition to sharing their early insights into the musician in question, the authors sought to demonstrate validity and benefits of collaboration between the academic and the family historian in the study of Scotland's modern popular and traditional music.

Since its initial presentation there have been several significant steps towards better understanding and appreciation of both this previously obscure individual and of the contextual history of the harp in Scotland as mentioned in the text and postscript.

STUART EYDMANN

I first came across the name Héloïse Russell-Fergusson in the early 1970s when, in my late teens, I was a student at the Glasgow School of Art. During lunch times, I would escape to Cuthbertson's, a music shop in Cambridge Street, where I would pass the time browsing and reading the sleeve notes of their range of traditional music records. Among the racks of long-play discs on display were a couple of quirkily packaged, extended-play singles bearing the musician's triple-barrelled name [1]. I did not give this much thought until many years later when I was performing with the Whistlebinkies at the Festival Interceltique at Lorient in Brittany and had a chat with some Breton musicians about the twentieth-century revivals of our respective musics. One of the Bretons said to me: 'Of course, there would have been no harp in Brittany, and no Alan Stivell, without the influence of your great Scottish heroine, Héloïse Russell-Fergusson'. Yes, the name was vaguely familiar to me but I was ashamed to admit I knew little more than about those records. More recently, while researching the century musical links between Scotland and Brittany (Eydmann 2018a) and while working a modern history of the clarsach in Scotland (Eydmann 2017), things began to fall into place. I began to seek out all that I could find out about her and her music and was soon intrigued by her role as an early professional woman within Scottish traditional music, her position as an 'outsider' relative to the Scottish musical establishment (Eydmann 2018b), her scholarship on the history of the harp, and the music she created - particularly on those little EP records.

I consulted musicians from the clarsach-playing world but was disappointed that, while they knew of Héloïse, most dismissed her and her music. I visited the Mitchell Library, Glasgow, to consult the material she deposited there [2] and pulled my notes together to present a public research seminar on my findings at the School of Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh. This led to a few new leads. At that time, however, I was unaware that there was someone else on the trail of this fascinating musician.

HÉLÈNE WITCHER

Héloïse Russell-Fergusson was my aunt. I encountered her only once, in June 1969 in Crianlarich, where my mum and I had met her for lunch. She was 72 and I was 18. I found Héloïse to be warm, inquisitive and endearingly eccentric. We stood outside by the cars afterwards, she heading back to Oban, mum and me to Rowardennan. As she opened the car door I did a double take to see tiny plant pots along the top of the dashboard and in the ashtray of her car. “I’ve never had a house or garden,” she laughed, “this has to do”.

My aunt was born in Glasgow in 1896, the first of four children, her father William Ferguson, a Glaswegian, and her mother, Hélène Russell, from Bute. Her father was a Director of Barclay Curle shipbuilders and the family were part of the comfortable middle classes that were settling the west end of the city at the time. Her parents employed a nurse, Rebecca Mathieson, from Kilmonivaig in Invernesshire and the housemaid Mary MacVicar from Spean. Both were native Gaelic speakers and I speculate that Héloïse would probably have spent hours with these young women, hearing more Gaelic than English during her early years.

From around 1903, the family also rented a house in Port Appin, close to Lismore, and although my grandfather would have stayed mainly in Glasgow, I suspect much of Héloïse’s childhood was spent in Argyll. In 1914, the family finally bought the rural house and its surrounding land and my grandmother settled there permanently.

Nothing is known of Héloïse’s schooling but I have found that in 1914 she enrolled at the Royal Academy of Music in London where she studied piano, singing and harmony. She graduated in 1916, aged 20. That year, she had at least one composition published in London and which is part of a collection from the period held in the British Library. [3] At home, I have three other published compositions from 1917 and one from 1918. [4] She gave recitals in London and Glasgow but didn’t seem able to settle. In 1923 she went to Washington DC to teach piano in a girls’ school and it was while there that she found and bought a second-hand, American-made Celtic harp, produced for the expatriate Irish market. She recalled a kind of epiphany that soon led her to learn the instrument and devote her life to it:

‘Playing in my studio alone one night, one single chord on the piano made me suddenly pause. I do not know why. I was swept thousands of miles back to where the seabirds shrilled above the gale as they did centuries ago. The Hebridean people’s songs! I lost all sense of time. I was spinning with them; milking. I was waulking the cloth although I HAD NEVER SEEN THIS DONE. I keened tragically on the shore with the rest when the lads failed to return. That had happened so often. I was quite, quite familiar with these islands although I HAD NEVER BEEN THERE!’ [5]

Of course, she had been there, at least through the stories and songs of Rebecca and Mary. The clarsach seems to have triggered deep, early memories in a very visceral way. In *Musicophilia*, Oliver Sacks remarks on the extraordinary tenacity of musical memory, speculating that ‘...so much of what is heard during one’s early years may be “engraved” on the brain for the rest of one’s life’ (Sacks 2007, xii).

In the United States she was greatly encouraged by the celebrated concert harpist Mildred Dilling (1894-1982) and she returned almost at once to Scotland, heading straight to the Hebrides anxious to learn more about Gaelic music. Mildred came to the UK in 1928 and gave concerts with Héloïse in London and in Glasgow that also featured a cellist. The programmes mixed classical harp pieces, Gaelic songs to clarsach and ensemble playing. Perhaps still not entirely confident that she could make a living with the clarsach, she was still giving occasional piano recitals including one in 1929 with John Barbirolli conducting the Guild String Orchestra. [6] The programme for that performance trails her next piano concert where she was accompanied by Marie Dare (1902-1976) on cello and the

baritone Sinclair Logan. This musical link with fellow Scot Dare was to develop over the following decades.

STUART

By the early 1930s Héloïse was giving regular recitals of clarsach music and songs [7], broadcasting on BBC radio [8] and recording for the Beltona label [9]. Her early gramophone recordings suggest a style and repertory very much in the mould of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser (1857-1930) and her daughter Patuffa (1889-1967) and I would suggest that she consciously exploited the market for Hebridean music previously developed by that partnership.

While in the Hebrides she met Kenneth Macleod (1871-1955) who had been Marjory Kennedy-Fraser's Gaelic collaborator. They subsequently developed a musical relationship and we know from her papers in the Mitchell Library that she gained some unusual and unique songs from him. The content of these manuscripts and of private recordings Héloïse made of the material they contain remains largely unexplored and unheard. In 1931 Kenneth Macleod went to London to 'tell legends of the isles' at a concert at the Aeolian Hall where Héloïse played clarsach along with Marie Dare and concert harpist Julia Wolf. While I accept that many Gaels are uncomfortable with Macleod and do not trust the authenticity of his music, I hold that he did give us some beautiful material, irrespective of whether it was collected or invented within the tradition and it is easy to see how Héloïse would be attracted to his work.

Héloïse's emergence as a professional clarsach player/singer was happening before the founding of the Clarsach Society which subsequently led the popular revival of the instrument in Scotland. Although she was present at the inaugural meeting of the Society in 1931, she was never a member nor very closely associated with the organisation. Some suggest that this was because, as a professional player, she was excluded from what was then a strictly amateur society, but I'm sure it was more to do with her distinct personality type. Struggling to find words to encapsulate this I was delighted to find and adopt the following description of her fictitious contemporary Jean Brodie given by Muriel Spark:

'There were legions of her kind during the nineteen-thirties, women from the age of thirty and upward, who crowded their war-bereaved spinsterhood with voyages of discovery into new ideas and energetic practices in art or social welfare, education or religion. ...the vigorous daughters of dead or enfeebled merchants, of ministers of religion, University professors, doctors, big warehouse owners of the past, or the owners of fisheries who had endowed these daughters with shrewd wits, high-coloured cheeks, constitutions like horses, logical education, hearty spirits and private means. ...They were not, however, committee women.' (Spark 1965, 42-43)

There are records of her playing in Europe, including Netherlands in 1930 and Paris in 1931. In the latter, we find her working again with the formula of clarsach, concert harp and cello, in this case using local professional musicians. From a digest of events in the city, we see that Marie Dare was also playing in Paris that same week. [10] Had they arranged their gigs and travelled together? In 1934 Héloïse was invited to participate in an eisteddfod-type event at Roscoff in Brittany along with the writer and piper Seton Gordon, representatives of the Scotsman, An Comunn Gaidhealach and the recently formed Scottish National Party. She was already moving in that circle having played at the unveiling of the MacCrimmon Memorials on Skye in August 1933. [11]

Her contribution to the druidic rituals (including giving an address in French) and recitals at Roscoff, Morlaix, Quimper and Saint-Brieuc went down a storm and she was crowned Bardess of the Gorsedd, a title she adapted as her stage name. In 1935 she was back in Brittany, at Rennes, providing a

musical prelude to the premiere of Jean Epstein's film *Chanson D'Ar Mor*. The cultural significance of this collaboration cannot be underestimated. This was the first ever film with Breton dialogue and is like an impressionistic, visual representation of a traditional Celtic folk-tale. While in Brittany, her Celtic harp was studied and measured leading to the making of prototype instruments that contributed to the revival of the instrument there. Soon afterwards she set off with her harp, or 'Harplet' as she called it, to travel the world.

HELENE

Throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s she had travelled widely with her clarsach in Europe, she had returned briefly to perform in the USA and in South and East Africa but in 1936 she set off for New Zealand on a tour that would last for two years and cover many other countries. This adventure is recorded in her letters to her sister, in a diary and in a series of 6 articles called *I Go Adventuring* that she wrote for the *People's Journal* in 1938-1939 [12]. She adored New Zealand and interspersed concerts and radio broadcasts with long treks on horseback and on foot in the Otago District where she slept in shepherds' huts, washed in burns and cooked over an open fire. In Bali she entertained mainly English-speaking Dutch audiences and was enchanted herself by gamelan music and the Kecak Monkey Dance, recognising the links between the music, drama and dance. As in Europe, everywhere she went, she explored and collected information, and photographs if possible, about indigenous music. She wrote to her sister about playing in Java:

'My first concert in Java was a great thrill. It was wonderful to sing once more to Dutch people. The Hebridean songs did their work thoroughly and several hundred people listened with unconcealed curiosity. Few had any idea of the ancient culture of Scotland. No one had seen a clarsach before. "Does everyone in those islands play that little instrument?" asked an earnest listener. I had to assure him that they did not, as yet, though perhaps, some day – I explained each song in Dutch although this was not absolutely necessary owing to the people's good command of English. It was thrilling to read in the press next morning, "If this art could be understood by all today, there would be no more war". Surely the old Highland songs could gain no finer tribute than that.' [13]

From Indonesia she travelled to Singapore, Korea, Shanghai and Japan before returning to Australia. She had been away for nearly two years, on the go all the time, but she was very upbeat in her letter from Melbourne:

'I've been very busy with daily broadcasting and one day I did it twice, morning and evening, the first time in my career. It was a hectic day and as I went to a lecture on Egypt by a friend in the afternoon, I had only two minutes to get there. Alas, I rounded the corner into the building, felt myself slipping in all directions and fell down into the liquid rubber solution as new lino was being spread. You never saw such a mess and as I was taken away by the workmen the wretched stuff started to solidify. I would have bounced anywhere!

I've met a brilliant pupil of Schnabel's who seems not to mind my rusty playing and we spend hours doing it. This morning a man rushed in waving a book of Aboriginal songs. "Madame Scotia, I think you'll be interested in these as you can sing them as well as the Hebridean stuff!" I begin concerts in Adelaide the day after I get there, at a Boys College and love these occasions. The boys are so interested and easy to hold and the masters always so surprised and no one realises I know all that is going on and the struggle the Head had with himself before engaging me as they always fight shy of female entertainers, saying they cannot hold the boys' [15]

Her return journey was via Egypt where she stopped for ten days. There she met Hans Hickmann, German musicologist who was living there and she subsequently devoted a whole volume to Egyptian

harps in her world survey of the instrument in the Mitchell Library. In that album she inscribed a quotation from the fifth century vizier, Ptahhotep, that, I think, echoed her own outlook on the world:

Do not let your heart become proud because of what you know;
Learn from the ignorant as well as from the learned man;
There are no limits that have been decreed for art;
There is no artist who attains entire excellence.

Her travels clearly informed her music – in many ways she was a pioneer of what we have come to call World Music.

She got back to London in late 1938.

STUART

Back in Scotland we find her performing at the Glasgow Empire Exhibition in 1938 and it is interesting to note that she played in the festival concert hall while members of the strictly amateur Clarsach Society performed in the less formal setting of the exhibition's 'clachan' complex. She continued to give formal recitals in conjunction with harp and cello and engaged the services of outstanding musicians such as leading concert harpists Maria Korchinska (1895-1979) and Sanchia Pielou (1915-1993). Her association with Marie Dare continued and we read, for example, of a recital by the pair at the MacLellan Galleries, Glasgow, in 1947 and, fortunately, we have a private recording of the two musicians from around that time playing material that was included in the programme. [16] Their arrangement of *Dunvegan Bridal Procession* is highly sensitive to the music and shows the same understanding of tradition we would expect from young musicians of the current phase of the revival.

HÉLOÏSE

After her return from her two years away, she continued to experiment with her professional name, calling herself Scotia, Bardess Scotia or Madame Scotia. During the war she returned to Port Appin where she threw herself the effort to gather scrap metal and paper. Such was her success that she soon gained a new local name - Madam Scrap. Her father had died in the late 1920s and in the mid-1930s, as she was touring, her mother moved to a farm in Sothorn Rhodesia, claiming the weather was better there than in Scotland. The Port Appin house was sold although Héloïse lived for a while in a nearby cottage. She then became increasingly itinerant, living sometimes in hotels, lodgings, with friends or in borrowed empty houses. In the late 1940s or shortly afterwards she dropped her first name entirely and asked friends to call her Jane instead. The reason for this remains obscure but I have met several people who knew her in the 1960s and recall her using that name. Professionally, she called herself simply Russell-Fergusson.

In the years after the war, she started generating what she called 'song-tales'; performances that consisted of a series of songs linked together to form a narrative. The first, *Tir-nan-Og*, was based on the traditional Scottish folktale. It was performed at Bolton's theatre in London in 1949 with Héloïse playing clarsach, Marie Dare on cello and an Allan McClelland playing the part of the islander. The following year, in 1950, she put it on, to mixed reviews, at the Edinburgh Festival. Marie Dare was involved again and Andrew Faulds played the islander. '.. why the dim, religious light?' asked the Scotsman. The Glasgow Herald found an unseen cello and harp was 'unusually effective and creates an atmosphere' [17] and the Scotsman concluded that Héloïse was at her best 'in the gay working songs of which she catches the lilt'. The reviewer felt that the music and folklore of the Hebrides

should appeal to an international audience because it was so ‘intensely national’ although, in that context, he was a little nonplussed that ‘a herding song sung by Miss Russell-Fergusson ... was reminiscent with its “tom-tom” accompaniment, of Africa.’ [18] I have since discovered that this was a waulking song that she had learned directly from the tradition-bearer Annie Johnston on Barra and conclude that the ‘tom-tom’ was her own interpretation of the percussive rhythm of the waulking process. A surviving private recording of this piece, *Deer Herding Song* [19], shows that she played percussive accompaniment by hand on the sound box of her harp, a technique since used by more recent clarsach players and with parallels in flamenco guitar music.

Another song-tale, *Hailing the Highlander*, that included an audio-visual presentation, was staged in 1951 at Pitlochry Theatre as part of the Festival of Britain. There were associated performances at the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh as part of the Living Traditions exhibition.

STUART

In the 1950s her profile faded although there are notices of her giving performances with the Dunedin Association alongside leading Scottish poets and composers. Also, it was during this period that she was ingathering and organising her excellent collection of organographic material on the harp that was subsequently gifted to the Mitchel Library.

HÉLÈNE

According to a set of storyboards and tapes she deposited with the Mitchell Library, Héloïse had worked on a kind of serial programme on Highland life and music for broadcast or performance that she called *Hebridean Song and STORY – The Young Piper*. In a letter to Mr Black, the City Librarian when donating her material to the library she wrote:

‘Dear Mr Black

We have today posted to you this series of 23 items on tape...

As you know, I worked out this series with two small battery tape recorders, and much of the work was done in my car as I have no facilities in an hotel.

I haven’t delegated any of the original songs to another singer, but sing them in the character which Kenneth Macleod noted. The chanter playing is mine, and this has helped to build up the Series.

The 4 tapes in small grey envelopes are the Original series. I expect you may want to reserve them, as future copies can always be made from them.

I am very glad to present these to the Mitchell Library and wonder if I could suggest that the items if borrowed for public use - be kept in their own completeness, - and not have narrative divorced from them..’ [20]

Stuart and I have recently been working with Gaelic song experts and the library, which has now undertaken digitisation and preservation of the material, to make sense of what it comprises.

STUART

These tapes appear to include music recorded in the field as well as songs she had collected in the Highlands and those obtained from Kenneth Macleod. The intended audience for her project is unclear but there are clear parallels with the contemporary audio documentary and broadcasting work of Alan Lomax and Ewan MacColl, although without their political edge. [21] Our early hopes that the songs on the tape and in manuscript might be interest have been justified.

The tapes were deposited with the library in 1969 and Héloïse died the following year. Héloïse missed, by only a few years, the modern renaissance of the clarsach at the hands of musicians such as Alison Kinnaird, Savourna Stevenson and Eddie McGuire. Ironically this modern revival was partly influenced, or perhaps 're-infected', by the music of Alan Stivell and others from Brittany that she had helped to stimulate.

However, between 1964 and 1969, the aging and latterly perhaps ailing, Héloïse also made, at her own expense, those four small EP records mentioned at the outset. Listening to them now we hear something quite innovative and almost prophetic, prefiguring developments of the folk music revival and in modern popular music. Multi track layering, minimalism, fusion with other world musics, improvisation and technological manipulation are all in there. In these regards she was ahead of her time, leading to her dismissal by those of the traditional music and clarsach establishments.

HÉLÈNE

No wonder that the late Martyn Bennett came to sample one of her pieces *Dance of the Drops* from the record *An Treisamh* for inclusion in the track *Wedding* on his celebrated work *Grit*. [22] In this she plays clarsach and mbira and we like to think that, at last, Héloïse had found at least one other kindred spirit who recognised her place in the history of Scotland's music.

Postscript

Since the presentation of this paper interest in Héloïse Russell-Fergusson has been growing. The authors gave an illustrated talk on Héloïse at the April 2017 Edinburgh International Harp Festival and Epstein's *Chanson D'Ar Mor* was screened at the Edinburgh Folk Film Gathering in May 2017 preceded by a clarsach and Gaelic song recital by the young musician Rachel Newton as a 'replication' of Héloïse's performance at the film's premiere. The film was followed by a discussion on the musician and the links between Breton and Scottish traditional music in the twentieth century. Héloïse's extended play records have been digitised as have her open reel recordings held at the Mitchell Library. The artistic and cultural significance of this legacy is now attracting overdue attention such as the event held in Glasgow in October 2019 involving Hélène, Kenna Campbell and Ishbel T. MacDonald.

Notes

- 1 Four discs were released by Héloïse on her own label Clarsach Records.
- 2 Héloïse Russell-Fergusson Collection, The Mitchell Library, Glasgow.
- 3 *Absence* (London, 1916).
- 4 Hélène Witcher collection.

5 *People's Journal*, 31 December 1938, 25.

6 Programme, Héloïse Russell, pianist, Aeolian Hall, London, 7 February, 1929.

7 Various programmes, Hélène Witcher collection.

8 For example, a solo radio recital broadcast from London on 4 February 1930 and a duet with Marie Dare, cello, broadcast on Midland Regional on 3 May 1932.

9 *A Chrunneag Leach / Iona Boat Song & Strusaidh Mi Na Coilleagan*, Beltona BL.2035. Extracts were included in *A Soundtrack to the Celtic Revival in Scotland* compiled by Stuart Eydmann to accompany the art exhibition *A Wide Kingdom* held at the Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh, in April and May 2014.

10 'Chants des Hebrides avec Harpe Celtique', advertisement in *La Semaine à Paris*, 24 March 1931, 49. Marie Dare studied in Paris with the virtuoso cellist, poet and composer Paul Bazelaire (1886-1958).

11 'The MacCrimmon Memorials', *Oban Times*, 12 August, 1933. There is a fine portrait of Héloïse, undated but probably painted between 1926 and 1935, by the celebrated portraitist Cathleen Mann in the musician's collection at the Mitchell Library, Glasgow.

12 *People's Journal* 28 January 1939, 6.

13 Letter, Hélène Witcher collection.

14 In Indonesia she stayed in a guest house above Batavia (Jakarta) where she drew a small harp in the visitors' book and wrote "...Greetings from the Clarsach of Scotland, Scotia, (H. Russell-Fergusson)". Copies in Hélène Witcher collection.

15 Letter, Hélène Witcher, personal collection.

16 Recording, Hélène Witcher collection.

17 *The Glasgow Herald* 29 August 1950, 3.

18 *The Scotsman* 28 August 1950, 6.

19 Recording, Hélène Witcher collection.

20 Letter from Héloïse Russell-Fergusson to City Librarian enclosing tape recordings, 1 October 1969. Mitchell Library, Glasgow.

21 For context, see Moran 2014.

22 *Grit*, Martyn Bennett, 2003, Real World Records CD RW 114.

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