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Performing Waulking Songs as an Emotional Practice in Gaelic Scotland

The Scottish Highlands have long been romanticised as a mysterious wilderness populated by warring factions and ancient tales. This image, cultivated in the post-Jacobite period, boasts Walter Scott among its main proponents, with Andrew Hook arguing that "through Scott the aura of romance finally settled upon Scotland [. . .] Her loyal, valorous, and proud people, her tradition of poetry and song [. . .] now appeared in new and totally irresistible form".[1] And although this portrayal has had an immense impact on how the Highlands are perceived to this day, it does little to explore the rich and difficult lived experience of Gaels in Highland Scotland. Scott and his cohort were correct, however, to highlight the ubiquitous role of poetry and song in this region. This was (and still is to a certain extent) a culture highly engaged by the oral tradition, where song accompanied every aspect of life, from work to important rites of passage and social gatherings every evening.[2] The ethnologist John Shaw argued that "the occasions for singing were so numerous that Gaelic song [. . .] has over generations inevitably made up a large part of the inner verbal dialogue among many traditional Gaels".[3] Gaelic literature was dominated by verse, and all verse was sung. Clan bards held an important place in the political hierarchy, and vernacular song-makers were held in high esteem. To understand the perspective of Gaelic Scotland, we must listen to their songs.

This chapter will focus on waulking songs *(òrain luaidh)*, where teams of women sang as they waulked the tweed. This was the method used to shrink woollen cloth prior to making garments, and involved hitting soaked cloth off boards over several hours whilst singing. The group sang together in the lengthy refrains, which were interspersed by shorter solo verses. Gaelic scholars date the composition of the earliest songs to the early seventeenth century and the last waulkings were documented in the early twentieth century.[4] The long span and regularity of the practice have left Scottish and Scottish Gaelic archives filled with

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1 Hook, 1989, 319.

2 Challan, 2012, 1.

3 MacLellan, 2000, 17.

4 Campbell and Collinson, 2019, 8–10.

hundreds, perhaps even thousands of songs which tackled a myriad of topics – from love songs to praise songs, flytings, and to political propaganda.[5]

These songs are an ideal source in the study of the inner emotional state and desires of women in Gaelic Scotland as they appear to have provided a vital form of emotional service for women in Gaelic Scotland. Margaret Harrison's analysis of 147 songs showed that around two-thirds of the corpus dealt with dark themes such as deep sorrow, longing, and anger.[6] We also know that waulkings were the highlight of the winter calendar for many, suggesting that the opportunity afforded to express raw emotion during the process was highly valued.[7] Specifically, I will examine what the content and formal structure of these songs might reveal about the emotion work woven into the manual labour of waulking. I will first consider the practice of waulking and then the nature of the shared compositional authorship of waulking songs. This will be followed by a close examination of five songs representative of the themes found in the broader corpus. Finally, I will turn to the prevalence of traumatic themes in waulking songs with a particular emphasis on the supportive nature of waulking created by the performance context.

Around 170 songs were included in the research and are largely drawn from the J. L. Campbell and Francis Collinson collections which printed examples of songs collected from the late nineteenth century to the 1960s.[8] Further examples come from relevant modern edited collections, as well as two nineteenth-century publications.[9] Oral versions of the songs from sound archives have also been cross-referenced where possible.

The Practice of Waulking

Waulkings were truly a community pursuit. The materials were local, the work was local, and the garment was used locally. Little to no money was exchanged and instead the work was paid for with gifts of food, drink, and gaiety.[10] Though males tended to be excluded from waulkings, they provided the stale urine which was central to the process.[11] This was combined with soap or hen dung to create a solution in

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5 Frater, 1994, 11.

6 Harrison, 2012, 210–211.

7 MacLellan, 2000, 17; Paterson, 1968; Shaw, 1953a.

8 Campbell and Collinson, 2018a, ix–xi; 2018b, 1–3; 2019, 1.

9 Mac-Na-Ceàrdadh, 1879; Nic a' Phearsain, 1891.

10 Campbell and Collinson, 2018a, 11.

11 MacKellar in Campbell and Collinson, 2018a, 12.

which the newly woven web was soaked before the waulking in order to set the dye.[12] Once the cloth was wet, the waulking began. Teams ranged from four to twenty women, hitting the tweed off a board as one with their hands or feet. Songs were vital to the process. *Clò bodaich* – a song-less web – was considered unlucky, and as such, songs were sung throughout, providing rhythm for coordinating the group.[13] The work dictated each aspect of the form of these songs. Given the demanding nature of waulking, the vocal range of these songs is relatively narrow, most often sung in the lower part of the singer's range.[14] Stylistically, this tone of the voice had much in common with the traditional *seann-nòs* singing, favouring an unstressed nasalised tone.[15] This type of singing is particularly sharp to the ear, cutting through the significant noise from the thud of the cloth.

Visiting observers were invariably disapproving of the singing, describing it as "very strange", and comparing it to screaming.[16] It is likely that travellers' preconceived ideas of what excellent singing should entail was shaped by the preference for soft and high-pitched female voices in genteel society, as decribed by Wordsworth in his poem 1807 "The Solitary Reaper", where he lauded the singing of a working Highland woman as "a voice so thrilling ne'er was heard/ In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird".[17] The sharp singing displayed at the waulking table, however, was far from this ideal, and which must have dashed the image of picturesque Highland peasants so prevalent in English-language culture.[18] Furthermore, we can detect racist undertones in the descriptions of visitors to waulkings. In 1831 James Logan described "the wild shrill airs" as giving "a truly savage character to the scene, and reminded me of some of Catlin's descriptions of the customs of American Indians".[19] The theories that Gaels were racially inferior to Lowland Scots pushed by the nineteenth century press are clear influences on these accounts.[20] Gaels themselves considered the singing both as practical and beautiful, often comparing the quality of performances to those heard in the highest performance arenas such as ceilidh houses and weddings.[21] As with more conventional performance spaces, there was a hierarchy of singers with those with the best voice often taking the lead.[22]

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12 Campbell and Collinson, 2018a, 9; MacDonald, 1966.

13 Campbell and Collinson, 2018a, 9–10.

14 Campbell and Collinson, 2019, 316.

15 MacDonald, 1980; MacRae and MacRae, 1964.

16 Campbell and Collinson, 2018a, 7, 9.

17 Wordsworth as quoted in Gillies, 2005, xxiv.

18 Hook, 319.

19 Logan quoted Campbell and Collinson, 2018b, 4–5.

20 Fenyö, 2000, 179; Kidd, 1995, 68.

21 Cross, 1962; MacLeod and MacLeod, 1958.

22 MacLean and MacLean, 1974; Shaw, 1953b.

The work dictated the tempo, with beats ranging from ~96 to ~160 beats per minute.[23] Refrains of vocables (words with no dictionary definition), designed to keep the rhythm of the work, alternated with single- or double-line verses. Verses were sung by a soloist, with refrains sung by the team, allowing the soloist time to rest her voice and take a breath. The verses entertained the waulkers with highly engaging narratives and subjects ranged from love to loss, gossip to traditional stories. Singing together fashioned a community unique to the time, place and task, and added considerable motivation and levity to the dirty and difficult work.[24] It was the refrain however, that was the most recognisable and important aspect of the song; dominating the opening and ending as well marking the change of topic or perspective.[25] These songs can be compared to the cloth they were intended to create – tweed. The refrains formed the base colour, constant and unchanging, but easily identifiable with verses more akin to the flecks of colour, which add depth and interest to the beauty of the tweed, but which are also unpredictable in their lack of uniformity.

Authorship of Waulking Songs

Campbell and Collinson suggest that the earliest waulking songs date no earlier than 1600, with the practice of waulking continuing across the Highlands until the early twentieth century.[26] The earliest songs share linguistic and rhetorical markers with the panegyric verse composed by professional poets in the seventeenth century.[27] Furthermore, the material culture and political framework described in these older songs are largely the life of the seventeenth-century ordinary Gaels.[28] However, identifying a single-named composer is very difficult for most of these songs. In the unusual occasion where a single author can be named, the song is exceptional as it invariably was the creation of one of the famous female bards of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries or from later political bards who used the waulking form to push their own political agendas.[29] Most composers have left very little trace in the historical record, with their names lost and their

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23 Campbell and Collinson, 2019, 314–316.
24 Campbell and Collinson, 2018a, 6.
25 Campbell and Collinson, 2018a, 228; Campbell and Collinson, 2019, 307–309.
26 Campbell and Collinson, 2019, 8–9.
27 Campbell and Collinson, 2019, 8–9.
28 Campbell and Collinson, 2019, 9.
29 Campbell and Collinson, 2018a, 94–95; Campbell and Collinson, 2018b, 154–159; Gillies, 179–181; Nic a' Phearsain, 291–293.

compositions attributed to 'anonymous' or 'traditional'. Our ability to add specificity to the compositional context is further complicated by the fact that the vast majority of songs were not committed to any sort of permanent record (either in written or aural/oral form) until the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is a tradition which survived orally for generations. We can, however, analyse the text to identify a core intention and narrative voice from a composer. Many songs present one perspective whilst the consistency of the rhetorical devices, internal assonance and rhyming schemes point to a largely constant transmission across the generations. Others have confusing narrative structures which suddenly change plot or perspective, suggesting that more than one song has been combined or that verses have been lost. Anne Frater argued that these different perspectives emerged from extemporisation at the waulking table, which often used the original opening line as a "springboard" from which to create a new narrative.[30] These sudden shifts in perspective, rhetoric and rhyme must be, then, an indicator of consecutive composition.

Alongside being able to identify single or consecutive composers, these songs were also the result of composite composition. The purely oral nature of the transmission over generations undoubtedly created an uncountable number of incremental changes to the structure and content of verses. As such, waulking songs provide an excellent example of Valdimar Hafstein's theory that the "folk tradition offered an alternative to authorship: folk tradition is peer-peer, it is collaborative, it is cumulative".[31] The sometimes extensive variation between versions suggests that the singer expressed the song as she saw fit; at times she could stay consistent with the narrative she had received aurally, whereas at other times, she could vary the song, either through omission, alteration of lyrics or by changing the topic entirely.[32] The specific intention behind a performer's choice of song is unknowable and will have varied significantly from singer to singer and performance to performance. The decision to sing a song is worthy of attention however, as it is important indicator that the performer was drawn to the piece enough to invest her energy in learning and actively performing the piece. Theoretically, it has been long established by musicologists that the act of choosing how to fill a sonic space is based on conscious decisions, with musical choices, as Christopher Small argued, "exploring, affirming or celebrating a sense of identity".[33] Furthermore, on a practical level, the first-person perspective of most of these songs pushed singers to embody the lyrics and/or themes of the song during the performance, at least to some extent. This must have been a significant factor

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30 Frater, 1994, 125.

31 Hafstein, 2018, 380.

32 Campbell and Collinson, 2018b, 44–53; 92–95; Campbell and Collinson, 2019, 156–165, 216–219.

33 Merriem, 1964, 81; Small, 1994, 74; Turino, 2008, 93.

to consider when choosing which songs to perform. The addition of a first-person song perspective to one's repertoire after all, not only shows that a woman was merely interested in the song, but was also prepared to voice the narrative as though she was the protagonist. And given that waulking songs were collected almost exclusively from oral sources, often generations after their initial composition, the very inclusion of each song in the archive is a testament to dozens, if not hundreds of singers, over multiple generations deciding to represent themselves through each song. In order to demonstrate this complex authorship in this chapter, I will use two terms to describe the composers and performers of waulking songs. 'Original composer' will refer to the motivations of the composer(s) in the probable earliest stage of the song's life, whereas composer(s)/performer(s) will refer to the person or people performing the song.

Themes of Waulking Songs

Female verse in the period before 1750, the period in which a significant number of the body of waulking songs originated, is dominated by domestic concerns. During this period, political song-making was generally the province of men in Gaelic society.[34] Indeed, the act of composing verse reserved for men was considered so scandalous that the "rebellion of women in this period consisted not in a physical struggle, but in breaking the taboos of the time, most notably in their song-making".[35] Very few, however, could afford to be labelled as divergent in a society where women had the same rights as minors and were reliant on their fathers and husbands. As such, only a few female bards have left any political poetry from the period before 1750. All of these bards came from the upper strata of society and most payed a price for the compositional output by being branded as either sexually deviant or engaged in witchcraft.[36] As a result, women's song became associated with love or mourning, and was most often sung during work.[37] Consequently, these songs were exponentially more emotional than the highly structured praise poetry of the political bards, where formalised codes could stem originality of thought and perspective. In broad terms, waulking songs followed the societal norms of what women were allowed to sing about. Love and loss dominated thematically and the songs which dealt with the matters of war, diplomacy and clanship did so obliquely

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34 Frater and Byrne, 2012, 21.
35 Frater, 1999, 114.
36 Ó Baoill, 2004, 141.
37 Frater, 1999, 111–114; Frater and Byrne, 2012, 23.

through these themes. Although there were political discussions, they were almost always linked personally to the composer(s)/performer(s)' lived experience and were of secondary importance.[38] Women's song, then, regardless of genre, often offers the historian a more personal insight into the emotional state of ordinary Gaels than that of the more prestigious male tradition.

The juxtaposition of formal rhetoric and of personal perspective is evident in 'Ach a Mhurchaidh Òig Ghaolaich (But, Beloved Young Murdo)'.[39] The imagery used in this song was heavily influenced by the rhetorical praise panegyric used by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century political bards, but here the composer(s)/performer(s) added a personal touch.[40] The descriptions of hunting prowess, musicality, and generosity employed through the song was a typical rhetorical choice used in the descriptions of an ideal leader and lover, or, as is the case here, the composer(s)'/performer(s)' particular desired.[41] However, there is an added intimacy in the description of her relationship through the clever use of repetition, an integral feature of waulking songs. This "incremental repetition" present in waulking songs, coupled with extensive use of negative antithesis and understatement, ensured that the song became "all the more intense when the words are sung, as each line is repeated, first as the second line of a couplet, and then as the first line of the next couplet".[42] The composer(s)/performer(s) of 'Ach a Mhurchaidh Òig Ghaolaich' manipulated this repetition to underline her love for Murchadh, starting her song with the declaration that "Ach a Mhurchaidh òig ghaolaich/ bidh tu daonnan air m' aire (But beloved young Murdo/ on my mind you'll always be)".[43] This is a powerful statement of her love in itself, but she deliberately juxtaposes it with long passages of common love imagery before cutting down the rhetoric to return to her opening statement. In doing so, the composer(s)/performer(s) appear to be mocking the very rhetorical devices they were using as the active placing of typical language next to the intimate langued implied that well-trodden love panygeric alone was inadequate to describe the extent of her adoration. We can imagine the cheers from the waulking table when the line reappeared throughout the song, as they had followed the hyperbolic and impersonal rhetoric, each repeated twice, layered on top of each other, only to be reminded that they recognised the voice of the protagonist – she was singing in the same room.

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38 See for instance Black, 2001, 36–39; 182–187; Campbell and Collinson, 2018a, 144–49; Campbell and Collinson, 2019, 148–53, 170–172.

39 Campbell and Collinson, 2018b, 26–29.

40 Campbell and Collinson, 2018b, 26–29.

41 MacInnes, 1970, 452, 456, 478.

42 Bateman, 1997, 661.

43 Campbell and Collinson, 2018b, 26–29.

As with other forms of European work songs, there was a fluidity between the themes of love and of sex in waulking songs, and there is open coveting of sexual relations throughout the corpus.[44] The gender exclusivity of the workspace allowed women to voice their true yearnings without much concern of judgement from male moral authorities. At times this could render very tender verse as seen below in Figure 1.

Chaidh mi 'na ghleannain a's t-fhoghar

Fig. 1: From Campbell and Collinson, 2018b, 290.

> 'S ruigea tu 'n t-àit' am biodh mise,
> Leaba bheag an cùl na ciste,
> Siud an leaba am biodh na gifhtean,
> Ge bè rannsaicheadh gun fhiosd i.

> *You'd reach the place where I would be,*
> *A little bed behind the coffer,*
> *That's the bed where the gifts were,*
> *Whoever searched it secretly.*[45]

More explicitly, the next example (Fig. 2) lists men in the community who the group jokingly imagine sleeping with.[46] The gaps in the text were filled with the names of men chosen by the waulkers and who, most likely, everyone knew.

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44 See for instance: Campbell and Collinson 2018a, 114–116; Campbell and Collinson, 2018b, 144–151, 172–175; 178–181; Campbell and Collinson, 2019, 206–207; Pickering, Robertson and Korczynski, 2008, 229.

45 Verses 15–18 (of 21). Campbell and Collinson, 2018b, 60–61. Note that spelling throughout chapter follow the conventions adopted by the cited editor.

46 Campbell and Collinson, 2018b, 60–61; 144–151; 172–175.

Hug hòireann ó, 's e m' aighear ì

Fig. 2: From Campbell and Collinson, 2019, 414.

Hug hòireann ó, 's e m' aighear ì,
Ho hì ri iù, 's e m' aighear ì,
Hug hòireann ó, 's e m' aighear ì.

'S e Raghnall théid a laighe leat
'S e _____ _____ fhuair thu,
'S e _____ _____ a nì do ruaimleachadh
An cuala sibh có laigheas leo'?
'S e Calum a théid a laighe leat

Hug hòireann ò, she's my delight,
Ho hì ri iù, she's my delight,
Hug hòireann ò, she's my delight.

It's Ronald who will sleep with you,
It's _____ _____ who got you,
It's _____ _____ who'll roll you around,
Did you hear who'll sleep with them?
It's Calum who will sleep with you.[47]

This song (Fig. 2) was a clapping song, used at the end of the process, and appears to have been a fun game constructed to celebrate the end of the waulking and foster a sense of unity in the group.[48] However, in a society where marriage decisions were often out of the control of these singers, and where women could even be sold into marriage or returned after an unsatisfactory year and a day, asserting

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47 Verse 1 (of 2) and refrain. Campbell and Collinson, 2019, 206–207.
48 Campbell and Collinson, 2019, 188.

your desires over your body was not only funny, but insubordinate.[49] These songs of expecting sexual intercourse with the lover of your choice, in reality, are closely related to the numerous songs of unrequited love which fill the corpus, often as a result of a high-born man marrying a high-born woman rather than the singer at the waulking table.[50] Similarly, songs listing reasons the composer(s)/performer(s) refusal to marry were equally unrealistic.[51] Often interpreted as examples of female empowerment in Gaelic societies by modern performers, they must have been as often cries of frustration as declarations of intent.

Waulkings as a Supportive Emotional Space

The powerlessness over one's body and the indignity of violation is most evident in the songs which discuss rape.[52] In each instance there appears to have been no repercussions for the perpetrator of the assault: on the contrary, according to the songs, the women were disgraced.[53] There is a particularly blunt description of rape in the South Uist tradition bearer Catriana Campbell's version of 'Chunnaic mise mo leannan (I saw my lover)' in Figure 3.[54] While she was mostly consistent with other versions by opening with a tale of spurned love laced with Jacobite propaganda, she suddenly changed tack after her sixth verse. The following six couplets have an inconsistent rhyming pattern, only partially related to the assonance schemes of the previous perspective. These verses are rhetorically simple, with little use of the panegyric code so evident in the other versions. This disorganised verse suggests that the end of Catriana Campbell's song was made up of extemporised verse with little rhetorical or poetic development from following generations, and it was likely that the original composer was a desperate woman who had finished the original story in an example of consecutive composition.

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49 Frater and Byrne, 2012, 29.

50 Campbell and Collinson, 2018a, 80–84; 106–109; Campbell and Collinson, 2018b, 66–71; 132–135; 178–181; Campbell and Collinson, 2019, 74–77; 166–169.

51 Campbell and Collinson, 2018b, 92–95; Campbell and Collinson, 2019, 190–193; Gillies, 378–380; Mac-Na-Ceàrdadh, 175–176.

52 Black, 2001, 182–187; Campbell and Collinson, 2018a, 70–73; 100–103; Campbell and Collinson, 2018b, 54–59; Campbell and Collinson, 2019, 156–164. Frater, 2012, 124.

53 Campbell and Collinson, 2018a, 100–105; Campbell and Collinson, 2019, 156–165; Frater, 2012, 124.

54 There is no copy of Catriana Campbell singing, or a transcription of her melody. Other versions here: Campbell and Collinson, 2019, 156–165; MacLean, 1950.

Chunnaic mise mo leannan

Sung by Mrs. John Galbraith (Mòr Iain Dhòmhnaill Phàdraig), Barra

♩ = 76

Refrain (solo)   (chorus)   Fine

Ho ro hó hì,   Hò ro nan, Hò ro chall éil-eadh, ho rohó hì,   hò ro nan.

8   Verse (solo)   Refrain

Chunn-a mis-e   mo___ leann-an,   Air each glas nan ceum_   eu-trom, ho
(I saw my love,)   *(On a lightly stepping grey horse,)*

Fig. 3: From Campbell and Collinson, 2019, 396.

'S ann air bothag an fhàsaich
      Thug am meàrlach mi air éiginn

'S ann am bothag a' ghlinne,
      Far nach cluinneadh iad m' éigheachd,

'S tha do leanamh 'nam achlais
      'S mi gun tacsa fo'n ghréin dha.

'S mura falbh mi as m' òige
      A dh'iarraidh lòn air gach té dha.

'S truagh nach cluinneadh mo chàirdean
      Am màireach gun dh'eug mi,

Chionns 's gun faiceadh iad soilleir
      Gu robh choir' aca fhé' ris.

It was in the bothy in the wilderness
      That the rascal raped me.

In the bothy in the glen,
      Where they'd not hear my cry.

Your child is in my arms, and I am
      Without a support in the world for him,

Unless I go in my youth to seek provision
      From every woman for him.

It is a pity that my relations would not
　Hear tomorrow that I had died,

So that they might see clearly that
　They themselves were to blame for it.[55]

The composer(s)/performer(s) here viewed the women of the community as a survival mechanism for her and her child, and this female network goes some way to explain why a woman who felt near to death (either in reality, or metaphorically, in shame) was enabled to air her most intimate anxieties to this audience. She was not alone: as has been already discussed, lost partners, infant mortality, unrequited love and the fear of poverty are common themes in waulking songs. The most extreme disclosure in the corpus is the admission of an incestuous relationship. In 'Stoirm nan gobhar ri taobh na h-abhann (The noise of the goats beside the river)' the composer(s)/performer(s) defiantly demonstrated a lack of regret for her relationship with her brother, and instead concentrated on her love for her son and on her fear of punishment.[56] And although the exclusivity of gender in the waulking environment meant that women mostly felt safe to compose and sing songs of trauma, this alone fails to explain why women actively chose to perform songs with such dark themes. Nowhere else in women's song were taboos so regularly commented on, and this begs the question of what was special about the waulking table which encouraged women to discuss their most vulnerable selves.

We should first reflect on the impact of the work and the workspace on singers' inhibitions. On a practical level, one of the most notable environmental factors to consider is the loud nature of waulking. Given that the raison d'être of waulking was to subject a woollen web to prolonged beating, these sessions were necessarily noisy affairs. And this din appears to have been akin to a protective audio shield for women.[57] Angela Bourke described two female singing practices in Scotland and Ireland, waulking and keening, in which women's opinions and complaints were freely aired.[58] She convincingly argued that the significant incidental noise created by the group of fellow female performers encouraged women to make subversive lyrical choices as the detail of the song would only be partially audible in the midst of the surrounding racket.[59] The well-known singer and tradition bearer Annie Johnston also addressed the accompanying noise in the waulking rooms

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55　Verses 7–12 (of 12) and refrain. Campbell and Collinson, 2019, 164–165.
56　Campbell and Collinson, 2018b, 80–83.
57　Radner and Lanser, 1993, 16.
58　Bourke, 1988.
59　Bourke, 1988.

when explaining that the combined singing and rhythm-creation of waulkings created a heightened atmosphere where "the workers [were] hypnotized by the combined effects of tune and rhythm, and [would] carry on till almost exhausted".[60] John Lorne Campbell analysed her descriptions and suggested that these "semi-trance conditions" facilitated a "complete lack of self-consciousness" among waulkers. Hamish Henderson went as far as arguing that these conditions created an atmosphere in which "the whole inner life of the women comes to the surface in uninhibited self-expression".[61]

Comparisons of these accounts and analyses with modern scientific work considering the impact of singing and moving together in controlled research settings today can shed light as to why waulkings had this trance-like quality. Emma Cohen argues that "mounting evidence from the behavioural and psychological sciences now indicates a powerful causal association between synchronous group activity and social cohesion".[62] Evidence has also emerged which suggests that "when people perform the same movements at the same time, there is a co-activation of action and perception networks which is believed to blur the sense of 'other' and 'self', and this leads to the reduction of pain thresholds and an increase of trust and generosity between people inside the group".[63] Whilst equivalent studies cannot be conducted on the waulking teams of the past, the similarities between the effects spoken of by witnesses and performers of waulkings and the phenomena observed in this modern research suggest that comparable group bonding was present in both settings.

It is also useful to consider the physiological changes in singers observed by scientists in their research on the impact of social singing in building community spirit and in the treatment of mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and PTSD.[64] Chemical changes in the saliva of those involved in community singing projects show an increase of Immunoglobin A, associated with positive emotional arousal, and a reduction of cortisol, an indicator of stress.[65] Although it is impossible to definitively project these findings of modern scientific research onto the waulking teams of the past, they may help in understanding why singers were so willing to explore darker themes in their performances. it would be

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60 Johnson in Campbell and Collinson, 2019, 6.

61 Campbell and Collinson, 2019, 6; Henderson quoted in Pickering, Robertson and Korzcynski, 232.

62 Cohen, 2019, 145.

63 Tarr et al., 2005, 3; Tarr et al., 2016, 344.

64 Beck et al., 2000, 87–106; Garrido et al., 2015, 2; Saarikallio, 2017, 77–79; Swart, 2014, 195, 199–202; Williams et al., 2018, 1037.

65 Beck et al., 2000, 88, 97.

reasonable to suppose that, as in the modern world, singing relieved stress during the times in which waulkings were a common affair – especially when dark thematic content of the songs is taken into account. The collective singing of waulkings happened every couple of seconds during the refrains, which were built on vocables. Many scholars have called the vocables which make up the majority of these collective refrains "meaningless" when discussing the lack of lexical definition for these words.[66] In light of this research however, such terminology should be used carefully as it was during the repetition of these vocables that the reduction of stress and anxiety, as well as the building of community spirit and trust, shown to be a consequence of collective singing, would have been developed. And, it was this context that was most likely a key environmental factor in encouraging women to delve into deeply emotional content. Therefore, although vocables do not have a lexical meaning, it can be supposed that their performance functioned as a catalyst in defining the thematic choices made in the verses during the original compositional stage.

Furthermore, some songs had short phrases among the vocables of the refrains.[67] Most appear from the perspective of the soloist, and, by adopting her point of view, the group validated and comforted the leader. Given that everyone around the waulking table shared a cultural and environmental context, it is likely that at least some of the supporting singers used the soloist's song to voice their own trauma during refrains. Many of the traumatic themes covered in the corpus discussed experiences common in these communities afterall. In 'A Dhòmhnaill Dhuinn, ma rinn thu m' eugcoir (O brown-haired Donald, if you wronged me)', (Fig.4) the whole table professed their distress at the loss of sons to impressment. Whilst the specifics of losing three sons to a press gang quickly after the death of a husband were unlikely to be shared throughout the waulking team, most women will have related to the story of loss whether through missing a relative in the army or having a son drowned at sea.[68] Furthermore, the theme of impressment or sons serving in the armed forces for long periods of time became increasingly familiar to communities, as the Highlands became one of the most heavily mobilized regions in Europe in the post-Jacobite period.[69] This song, therefore, can help us draw two types of conclusions about coping with the sudden loss of sons in Gaelic society. Firstly, the original composer's voice provided a personal account of grief and frustration at the consequences of the growing militarisation of the region. Secondly, the fact that this song remained in the tradition suggests that it was representative of women as a whole –

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66 Campbell and Collinson, 2018a, 227–237; Frater and Byrne, 2012, 24.

67 Campbell, 1984, 144–53; Campbell and Collinson, 2018a, 44–53; Campbell and Collinson, 2018b, 90–93; Campbell and Collinson, 2019, 92–93; Gillies, 58–59; Mac-Na-Ceàrdadh, 461–466.

68 Maciver, 2018, 249–265.

69 Dziennik, 2015, 5.

both the women who joined the leader in sorrow each refrain, but also generation upon generation who felt the need to voice this story. This continued performance, therefore, is useful evidence in an analysis of the emotional reaction to loss and conscription for women across multiple generations.

A Dhòmhnaill Dhuinn, ma rinn thu m' eucoir

Sung by Mrs. Mary MacNeil (Màiri Ruarachain), Barra

Fig. 4: Campbell and Collinson, 2019, 389; MacNeil, 1949.

> *A iù ra bhó, cha n-eil mi slàn,*
> *Hug hòireann ó, chan fhaod mi tàmh,*
> *A iù ra bhó, cha n-eil mi slàn.*

A Dhòmhnuill Dhuinn, ma rinn thu m'eugcoir
    Bha mi dhut mar thé 'ile a chàch.

Ged a thug thu an gini òir dhomh
    Daor an dròbh chuir mi 'n a' bhlàir.

Ged a thug thu bhuam an triùir ud,
    Bha an athair 'san ùir a' cnàmh,

Dealachadh nam fear o chéile,
    Dh'fhàig mi euslainneach gu bràch.

> A iù ra bhò, I am not well,
> Hug hoireann ò, I cannot rest,
> A iù ra bhò, I am not well,

O brown-haired Donald, if you wronged me,
        I was to you but as one of the rest.
Though you gave me the golden guinea,
        Dear was the drove that I sent to the field.

Though you took yon three from me,
        Their father was mouldering in the grave.

The parting of the men from each other
        Broke my health forever.[70]

Conclusion

This volume attempts to historicize the daily grind of ordinary people, and there were few tasks which were dirtier, smellier, and more exhausting than waulking in the Gaelic world. Moreover, as has been established throughout the chapter, these songs are highly revealing about the lives of the ordinary women who held very few rights and were often from the poorer portions of society. The combination of a female workspace with hypnotic movement and songs consisting of both solo and chorus lines encouraged and enabled women to vocalise their most intimate lives. These songs can bring us into the world of women, as they communicated in an unusually open and honest environment. And scholars of Gaelic Scotland are privileged by the fact that sound archives are filled with these songs – we can actually listen to women who waulked sing and describe the process.[71] However, these recordings can only introduce us to the sonic world of waulkings. Mostly made in the mid-twentieth century by visiting collectors, the recordings offer a mere impression of what waulkings were. The young voices who had waulked have grown old in these recordings, and it is impossible to imagine the chatter, smell, or excitement of such a gathering in the midst of the dark Northern winter night. Yet, to properly understand these songs, the full context must be taken into account. A complete analysis of waulking songs must include two vital components then. First, the impact of the form must be fully acknowledged and analysed. Not only were these songs with melodies and singers, but they were used for a specific purpose. A key question could include how the structure of song (e.g. verse repetition) changed the reception of the lyric for instance. Secondly, the motivation for performance and/or

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70 Verses 1–4 (of 11) and refrain. Campbell and Collinson, 2019, 148–151.
71 The hyperlinks referenced will take you to sound files to recordings of the songs and of the discussions about waulking.

composition should be central to any analysis. This calls for the contextualisation of the performance context of the original composition, and a consideration of why the song remained important enough to women to ensure its survival within the oral tradition. The benefits of this thorough contextualization is immeasurable – scholars can gain a nuanced insight into the intimate hopes and emotional lives of women whose names have been lost to the historical record.

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