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Hebridean Rowing Songs

John Purser

Including islands, Scotland has 13,115 kilometres of coastline (69% of the UK coastline) and, proportionately, by far the greater part of this is on the west coast. In relation to the size of the country, this is one of the most complex coastlines in the world, which also affords transport routes that penetrate deep inland. The Outer Hebrides and indeed the whole outer edge of the west coast, are open to the Atlantic Ocean, but even the Inner Hebrides can be subject to huge seas, violent storms and troubling tidal currents, some up to 12 knots at a spring tide, and between the islands of Jura and Scarba creating the world’s third largest whirlpool, the Coire Bhreacain.

An excellent introduction to the more recent world of the Hebridean seas and fishing is the film Iorram, which can be hired to view from the official Iorram website. The film concludes with what is by far the most popular of Gaelic songs associated with the sea, Fear a’ Bhàta – The Boatman. This is a beautiful late eighteenth-century love song composed by Jane Finlayson from Tong on the Isle of Lewis. It is not a rowing song but could perfectly well serve as one.

There is a multitude of songs in Scottish Gaelic associated with the sea. Many, of course, are laments for the countless drownings that occurred over the centuries, but this study is confined to a class of work song known as Iorram. The term Iorram is not precise as it covers “boat” songs and other rhythmic work songs, but in many cases clearly applies to songs that were used to accompany rowing.

An early example of a song we know was used in 1787 to accompany rowing is Iorram na Sgiobaireachd – The Seafaring Iorram by Murchadh Mòr mac mhic Mhurchaidh, the fifth MacKenzie of Achilty who died c.1689 (Ó Baoill 1994; 148). Pace Ó Baoill, (1979; 279) this three-line strophic poem is indeed an encomiastic poem, but in praise of the poet’s boat, which is compared favourably with his mare (Dwelly 1977: 556). The melody comes from Simon Fraser’s 1816 collection and, with the repeat marked for the first line of the melody, covers four stanzas (see Figure 1). As there are nineteen stanzas, this pattern can only be made to fit by the use of “rolling stanzas”. That is to say, the words of the fourth stanza are repeated for the first stanza of the next group of four. This is a common practice in Gaelic song. There are no vocables or chorus to this tune.
which is a popular one also used for the religious song *An Claigeann* by Dugald Buchanan. Fraser's added accompaniment is, for its time, remarkably restrained.

Figure 1. Simon Fraser, *Tha m’ aigne fo ghruaim*

Tha m’ aigne fo ghruaim. Simon Fraser, The Airs and Melodies Peculiar to the Highlands of Scotland and the Isles, Edinburgh, 1816, No. 98: 38

Another fine and popular rowing song in praise of a boat is *Mhàili Donn*. The boat is addressed as though she were a woman. *Mhàili Donn* can be heard on the Fuaran website. A fine different tune and verses is on YouTube sung by Brian Ó hEadhra.

Rowing songs survive in the Scottish Gaelic tradition in some numbers, but they are no longer in use as few people do any serious rowing that is not for sport or leisure. Many rowing songs survived in an alternative use as waulking songs (Tolmie 1997). Waulking songs were used to accompany the manual fulling of tweed and required communal rhythmic coordination. One informant recorded in 1968, Donald Sinclair (Tobar an Dualchais track 58643), maintained that rowing songs had sixteen lines. Virginia Blankenhorn does not refer to this assertion but states that

[a] number of stylistic features typically characterize songs in this group, including:

- call and response alternation of soloist and chorus; strong, regular rhythm;
- prominent use of refrains, often two or more refrains of different structures (interlinear, intralinear); flexible performance structure, reflecting the immediate needs of the work; “wrenched stress”—rhythmic emphasis on what would normally be an unstressed syllable (Blankenhorn 2018: 105).

Rowing songs, however, can be as useful to a single oarsman as to many. They could be selected according to the nature of the boat, the state of the sea and the weight of the cargo. As Anne Gilchrist has commented:

the slow and solemn character of several of these rowing-measures appears in some instances to be due to the fact that they were also of the nature of laments, being chanted by the rowers conveying the remains of chiefs across the western seas to Iona.

Two such examples, *Iùraibh o-hi*, *Iuraibh o-hù* and *Thoir mo Shorraidh thar Ghunaigh* – *Bear my Farewell across the Sound of Gunna*, are discussed below.

Rowing songs were used by oarsmen on larger vessels such as the *birlinn* (a kind of galley used from medieval times well into the sixteenth century). A *birlinn* was both sailed and rowed – rowed if there was no wind, rowed if there was too much: in the Hebrides steady breezes between force three and force six on the Beaufort scale are not the norm, so rowing was common. Some general remarks about oar lengths and stroke speeds with respect to the delivery of rowing songs may prove useful: they are based upon the present author’s own experience and that of Lewis Purser, who has been a
rower on the reconstructed sixteenth-century *birlinn* the *Aileach*, as a competitive rower for Dublin University, and also on the reconstructed fifth-century BC Greek trireme *Olympias*. Essentially, the size of vessel does not have much influence on the stroke speed, assuming the vessel has been well constructed with rowers in mind. The stroke speed is counted by the number of in-strokes per minute. In the case of a single rower managing two oars, stroke speeds are likely to be slightly slower.

The highest rate in a racing eight is mid-40s, at the very start and end of the race if racing another boat for the line. Steady state is mid 20 strokes per minute, e.g. for winter endurance training over 2 hours non-stop. The highest speed under oar recorded in the Trireme Trials 1987, 1988 and 1990 was at a stroke rate of 46. Steady state rowing between islands etc. was 25-30 strokes per minute. We didn’t do speed trials under oar in the Aileach.

Oar length is commonly determined by the width of the vessel with 1/3 of the oar’s length inboard and 2/3 outboard as a rule of thumb. The closer the gunwale to the sea, the longer the oar can be. However, the rubber dinghies used today to take sailors out to their moorings have very short oars with minimal leverage and require a more rapid stroke speed than would be normal. By comparison, the Irish *curragh* has very long oars with narrow blades. Like the rubber dinghy, the *curragh* has a very shallow draught and is easily pushed about by the wind or a lumpy sea, but it was commonly rowed out into the open Atlantic by men fishing for basking shark: the long oars gave the necessary leverage and required great skill and coordination in handling, and this leverage was increased by the fact that the oars were crossed in front of the oarsmen, so that the arms were also crossed. For *curragh* racing, wider oar blades are used.

The main determinant in stroke speed and length is the sea state. The shorter and steeper the seas, the shorter and more rapid the stroke, simply to maintain headway. A short sea is one in which the distance between waves is small. Standing waves are typically short and steep and common when tide and wind are in opposition. In all situations, technique is fundamental. A long slow efficient stroke can be much faster than a rapid less efficient one. With respect to singing while rowing, both can be adapted to each other, but clearly the needs of the rowers come first and the choice of rowing song may call for refined judgement and understanding of rhythmic coordination. It has been suggested that there were two types of Gaelic rowing song, one for larger, one for smaller vessels (Collinson 1966: 81). Despite wide-spread enquiry, I have been unable to verify this statement which is given without any evidential backing.

Powerful evidence for the use of rowing songs comes from Alasdair MacMhaighstir Alasdair’s famous poem *Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill* (c.1750). As the crew start out on their epic journey, a *iorram* is called for by Calum Garbh mac Raghnaill nan Cuan (Rugged Malcolm son of Ranald of the Ocean). There are sixteen men at the oars and the description of the effort required of them is magnificent.

```plaintext
Sgobadh *fonnmhor* gun éislein
Ri *garbh-phrosnachd* ‘chéile
‘S *iorram* *ghleusd* ann am beul fir a *bràghad*,
Cogall *ràmh* air na bacaibh,
Leòis is *rùsgadh* air bhasaibh,
‘S ràimh da *sniomh* ann an achlaisean *àrd*-thonn.
Biodh bhur *gruaidhean* air lasadh
‘S biodh bhur *bois* gun leòb chraicinn
Fallas *mala* bras-chnapadh gu *làr* dhibh. (Thomson 1996: 142.)
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The rhythm of the poem makes extensive use of anacrusis. For rowers the in-stroke would occur on the third; third; and third and ninth syllables per line as indicated in bold with a silent beat between stanzas. Given the general rule in Gaelic that vowels with a diacritic are stressed, there will inevitably be a number of “wrenched accents”, adding to the vigour of the song. Riach’s loose but splendid English version renders much the same passage thus:

The blisters and peeling of palms,  
the oars twisting angles in waves –  
Two sides of each face  
are lit up on each cheek –  
Two hands on each oar are abrading,  
The sweat from each forehead  
falls through every eyebrow,  
each body is streaming with sweat,  
and all boards below  
are wetted and glow,  
spangles are glistening,  
all ears are listening,  
song is the measure, is now – (Riach 2015:22)

There are sung versions of this section of the poem. Duncan MacDonald’s version, recorded in 1950, can be heard on 48640. MacDonald repeats each three-line stanza, the first statement on a descending phrase, the second intoning on the lowest note and ending with a musical anticipation of the start of the next stanza. MacDonald’s rhythmic regularity is not immediately obvious and might not seem functional, but the first statements fit the proposed in-stroke per syllable, given above, readily enough; and the second statements subtly fit the same pattern, depending upon when he chooses to breathe. Sometimes he breathes immediately after the third line, on other occasions after the fourth or fifth – that is the first or second of the repeat. It would seem that his intention was to sing each stanza with its varied repeat in a single breath but that this proved too difficult – hardly surprising at the age of sixty-eight. It is also clear that he is singing from a written version of the poem for there is the sound of a page turn immediately before the twelfth stanza and this is close to the page turn in the only edition then available, Sar-Obair nam Bard Gaelach. Another clearly related version sung by Ruairi Iain Bhàin, is published in Collinson and, judging by the transcription, was delivered freely (Collinson 1966: 79). Donald MacKay (48239) says he read in a book that the poem was written on shore, not at sea, with implied criticism of its fitness as a rowing song. This seems a bit hard on poets in general if they are obliged to live out everything they invoke in order to acquire credibility. The likelihood is that this is a genuine memory of how the Iorram would have been sung, and the subtlety of its musical rhythms is entirely in keeping with MacMhaighstir Alasdair’s virtuosity.

Whether these recordings genuinely reflect eighteenth-century practice can never be verified, but we do have at least one published rowing song from that period - Imir fein, a Choinnich chridhe - Row, good Kenneth, published in 1784 (MacDonald 2000: 62, see Figure 2). MacDonald marks this to be played slowly. The words would suggest that this rowing song comes from as early as the end of the sixteenth century. The story is that Alan Morrison was being pursued at sea by Niall Odhar MacLeod of Lewis and Alan is encouraging his boatman Coinneach to row hard to escape. There are several recordings of this song, all at much the same relatively unhurried pace, the words notwithstanding. The recordings are all variants of the same tune which is not the one
given in MacDonald nor that transcribed from William Matheson. It is hard to choose between the three tunes. The MacDonald tune is perhaps more assertive and urgent, the one which has survived in the tradition more encouraging, but perhaps more conventional. It can be heard on 91896, 88742, 71718, 39647, and 22290. Matheson’s tune could be seen as a less athletic variant of the latter. It would be good to hear the verses sung to MacDonald’s tune but there appear to be no recordings of its use.

Figure 2. Imir Fein, Patrick MacDonald

Because a significant proportion of surviving evidence for rowing songs exists only in the form of transcriptions, caution is required and one might wish to apply it when a transcription involves a 5/4 bar within a 4/4 matrix, as in Leis a’ bhàta dhubh.

Figure 3. Leis a bhàta dhubh, transcribed by John Purser from the singing of Colin Morrison

However, when two renditions produce the same result and when one attempts to row to the song, the anomaly vanishes. The workable pace of rowing to this song as recorded by either Colin Morrison or Janet MacDonald (63507) is to place every in-stroke every two beats. This results in a standard rate of about 25. Janet MacDonald accompanies her singing by beating time on each beat and adding a beat for breath at the end of each stanza but keeping an absolutely steady pulse. This would work well if every second beat is counted as an out-stroke, with the added beat for breath making the total number of beats 22. However, without the extra beat for breath the 5/4 bar throws the accent onto alternate beats each time round, thus giving the rhythm even more life, though it has plenty to begin with. The words praise the boat and her crew, but those of the chorus have no meaning.

Here we encounter the anomalous fact that a considerable proportion of the sounds of meaningless vocables in iorrám have no parallels in spoken Gaelic.

   Much of it consists of syllables like hó, hé, hi, hao, há, and combinations such as horó, and hirí which editors, often unjustifiably, tend to split into single syllables.
   (Bruford 1978: 5)

No explanation for the anomaly has established itself, but it is possible that a Norse influence is in evidence, which might also account for their occasional presence in Irish song.
19 A typical use of such vocables can be found in *Iuraibh o hi* (fig.4), a rowing song shown here as collected by Frances Tolmie. It is said by her to be “a rowing as well as a waulking-song”. She adds “The movement being slow, it was suitable when a boat was well-laden and heavy” (Tolmie 1997: 236). Collinson suggests that this must have been sung with an oar-stroke per crotchet, but even sung slowly this would result in a wildly improbable 50–60 strokes per minute (Collinson 1966: 80–1). It works perfectly well at a pace between 20–30 strokes per minute with each in-stroke on the first beat of each bar. As seen above, this is the steady-state pace for winter endurance.

**Figure 4. Iuraibh o hi.** Frances Tolmie, “One Hundred and Five Songs of Occupation from the Western Isles of Scotland.”


20 This rowing song is a girl’s lament for her lover, presumed drowned at sea. It has some of the most beautiful of lyrics, in this section listing all the sounds the girl can hear but no human voice:

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Nuair chuala mi fuaim nan tuinne
Fuaim an calltainn ris a’ chuileann,
Fuaim an t-siaban ris a’ mhuran,
Fuaim a’ chrònaich ris a’ chuinnich,
Fuaim nan Gall rin cuid loingeis,
Fuaim na ràmh a’ reubadh tuinne;
Gur e mise tha duilich
I heard the sound of the waves,
The sound of the hazel against the holly,
The sound of sand-drift against the marram-grass,
The sound of nut trees against their moss,
The sound of the foreigners in their ships,
The sound of ropes against their blocks,
The sound of oars slicing the waves;
I am despairing,
```

21 The Tobar an Dualchais website gives a number of rowing songs, as follows: An t-iorram Niseach (22290/1); Iomaiream ò thèid i dh’aìndeoin (58816/1); Alla bharra bò choisinn cò bheag (103479/1); Iorram suirghè (94840/1); Iorram Ùigeach (101701).

22 A particularly popular example is *Iomairibh Eutrom Ho Ho* 26557, but it is also strange. The rowers are told to row lightly. A dairymaid has gone to pick mussels at high tide, a thing nobody ever does. She cuts her hand and breaks her leg and drowns – is literally sucked down.

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Iomairibh eutrom ho ho
Huraibh eile hoireanan
Iomairibh eutrom ho ho.
Chaidh a’ bhanarach dhan tràigh
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*Figures* 4, 5, 6.

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If this is a lament, it is unsparing in its detail and could also serve as a warning. It might imply that a dairymaid would not understand the sea. Maybe the song describes an actual event, with, as a driving force, the tendency of Gaelic songs to accept realities and even emphasise them. The range is an octave and the melody insistent.

**Iorram suirghes** is a love song composed early in the nineteenth century by the parents of Oighrig MacCrimmon of Hiort (St. Kilda). It celebrates the return of the sea-birds to the cliffs and the presence of cattle in the folds, but although its rhythm is suitable for rowing it is not clear that that was ever its function. **Iorram Ùigeach** (Uig rowing song) is relatively modern, probably originally composed in English by Neil Matheson and translated into Gaelic by Neil Shaw. Matheson came from Uig on the Isle of Skye.

**Eile na Hùraibh o-ho** is one of the rowing songs collected by Frances Tolmie, to which Anne Gilchrist added the following comment:

> in the rhythmic rise and fall – the ocean swing – of its well-marked choruses, this song possesses considerable resemblance to a sea-chanty... (Tolmie 1997: 237)

A slightly different version of this **iorram** entitled **Èileadh ‘s na Hùraibh o-ho** can be heard on 4374. Another version was published by Margaret Fay Shaw (Shaw 2005: 208-9), and a different tune but similar text are published in *Hebridean Folksongs I* (Campbell and Collinson 1969: 74-5, 169-70, 269). The version printed here (Fig.5) is the one given by Tolmie.

![Figure 5. Eile na Hùraibh o-ho, Frances Tolmie](image)


Rowing songs must have been widely used in other cultures. They should not be confused with hauling or portage songs such as the famous Volga boat song, but one of the earliest recorded rowing songs, albeit with words only, dates from c.611 AD. It is **Celeuma – Carmen navale**, the song of St Columbanus with a chorus borrowed from an earlier Roman song (Kenney 1997: 195).

> See how the greased keel slips over the seas and through the flood of twin-horned Rhine, cutting through the woods. Heave men! And let resounding echo sound our “heave”.

The Irish Forde Collection describes **Barbara Needham** as “A rowing song heard on the passage to Clare Island”. It is marked to be played “with animation” and, being a jig, this makes musical sense: but if it is indeed a rowing song, then the stroke can only come every two bars. One does not row to Clare Island far out in the middle of Clew Bay at a constant sprint.
Scottish but not Gaelic, is a Norn rowing song. Norn is a language not spoken in Scotland for the last two hundred and fifty years but surviving in song remembered by John Stickle and Kitty Anderson. This is a prayer for protection at sea, a rowing song - but on this occasion the oars are in use because there is too much wind for the sails.

Starka virna vestilie
Obadee-a, obadee-a
Starka virna vestilie
Obadee-a monye
Stala, stoita, stonga, raera
'T' what ta doo, da bunshka baera
'T' what ta doo, da bunshka baera
A litera mae vee drengie
Saina papa wara
Obadee-a, obadee-a
Saina papa wara
Obadee-a monye.

Stronger wind comes from the wester
Curse the weather, curse the weather
Stronger wind comes from the wester
Curses from all us sailors!
Stow the shrouds, the yards and sails,
The dear old ship she'll ride the gales,
The dear old ship she'll ride the gales,
So give her the best you can, boys.
Bless the ship, almighty Father
Curse the weather, curse the weather
Bless the ship, almighty Father
Curses from all us sailors.

There is an almost brutal economy about this tune; narrow-ranged, repetitive, using only four notes: with such basic concentration one senses the battle against the weather. It can be heard on 47851 as sung by Kitty Anderson. Also known as The Unst Boat Song, it was recorded by Hom Bru on their LP Obadeea in 1982. Popular, but a modern construct, is The Mingulay Boatsong with English lyrics by Sir Hugh Roberton written in the 1930s and set to a traditional Gaelic tune. This song was never part of the rowing song tradition.

Perhaps the most beautiful of all rowing songs is almost wholly anonymous. Only the names of the two rowers are known – Iain and Donald. That's it. The grieving lover is not named, nor the beautiful brown-haired girl whose death has caused him so much grief he would rather have died of fever before he ever knew her. The melody is quite wide-ranging – a tenth – and it is scarcely possible to describe the vocables as 'meaningless' when all one has to do is say Thug oireann o rò hù bha hò to anyone conversant with the musical culture of the Gaels and they will conjure up the same desperately sad dip and swing of the oars as the girl's coffin is rowed from Gunna to Tiree or Mull for burial. Many such songs are known not from their words as titles but from their vocables as titles. The semantics of music have never been well understood. The song can be heard on 50384.

(Chorus after each stanza)
Thug oireann o rò hù bha hò,
mo nighean donn bhòidheach,
Thug oireann o rò hù bha hò.
(Stanzas)
Bear my farewell across Gunna Sound to Mull of the high mountains, where the cuckoo is heard on every brae before Beltane.

I see the boat coming with John steering her. keep her steady, Iain, keep her dry, Donald.

She lies in a narrow coffin Closed over and sealed.

I wish I had succumbed to the fever before I ever made your acquaintance.

Figure 6. Thoir mo shoraidh thar Ghunaigh, transcribed by Anne Lorne Gillies

The final example of a rowing song comes from my own part of the Isle of Skye. Chaidh na fir a Sgathabhaig was remembered by Frances Tolmie (1840-1926) from her childhood days at Rubha an Dùnain in Minginish on the Isle of Skye where the remains of the house she lived in from 1845 to 1857 may still be seen (Figure 7). It lies next to the spectacular Cuillin mountain ridge.
The men are rowing from Rubha an Dùnain to Loch Sgathabhaig (Scavaig), passing through Caolas Shòdhaigh (Soay Sound) (Figure 8). Far from being remote and lonely, Loch Sgathabhaig and Coire Uisge (Coruisk) were regular hunting grounds and Rubha an Dùnain was well populated and had been since the Stone Age, as the archaeological record demonstrates. The whole area was largely cleared of its human population in the nineteenth century, to make way for sheep farming. There is now no human presence. Francis Tolmie lived there after the clearances, but there must have been a residual population who knew the old songs which she recalled years later. Her mother had died and she was in the care of her uncle Hugh MacAskill. The MacAskills have long been a prominent family in the area, represented today by the internationally-known Danny Macaskill, whose video of him mountain-biking the Cuillin ridge has been watched by over 77 million people. The video opens with Macaskill rowing to the head of Loch Sgathabhaig much as the men in the song would have done. At 2’25” there is a clear view of the partially sunlit Rubha an Dùnain promontory, left of centre.

Here the particular becomes especially significant. The rhythms and the natural speed of delivery of the song fit the locality. If there is a south-west wind (and that is the prevailing wind), then it may well be against the tide in the sound, and at its west end it creates “confused sea” and short steep waves, whether there is a longer swell or no (Lawrence 1990: 57).
Rowing in bad weather with short steep seas, calls for a faster, shorter oar stroke. The present author has rowed a fair distance to this song in relatively calm seas and found that about 20 strokes per minute suits it well. This translates into minim=40 or crotchet=80: but Chaidh na fir a Sgathabhaig also works well at a faster pace of around 27 strokes per minute (minim=54, crotchet=108) and would equally suit rowing in short steep seas. What becomes clear when putting a rowing song to use is that it carries many benefits to the rower. It promotes efficient muscle use and flexible motion, and, during long spells of rowing, distracts from any discomforts and increases the efficiency to a remarkable degree.

The shape of the tune (Figure 9) – noticeably its difficult seist or chorus, reflects the verticality of the surrounding landscape in which the Cuillins sweep dramatically down into the sea. Internal assonance is present in each stanza, with two vowels (“ua”) combined and immediately preceding the leap of a sixth to the slender vowel vocables (“hi-ri-ri”) on the high notes. The effect is to emphasise height and is suggestive of the praise and encouragement contained in the stanzas.

There are six lines and six (two-bar) musical phrases. Four of the six phrases are sung to meaningless vocables. The range is wide – an octave and a fifth – and the tune is hexatonic. However, all phrases are pentatonic, bar one. The distribution of the vocables roughly matches the pitch: in particular, the syllables “o” and “ho-ró” are heard only on the three central notes, g, f, e flat. The high notes are all on the narrow vowel “i”, and where narrow vowels are on low notes (Fà-ill ill), they rise from a long vowel and are modified by the “ll”.

The musical structure is sophisticated. Only the second phrase is repeated, slightly varied, in the sixth and last phrase. The falling shape of the first phrase is roughly paralleled in the third, and the rising sixth in the fourth phrase is matched by a rising sixth at the end of the fifth phrase. The wide range and natural tempo make this an athletic song to sing and, as such, it has to be sung with spirit and confidence. Such a requirement adds vocal stimulus to the effort of rowing and imposes regular breathing.
Solo: Chaidh na fir a Sgathabhaig.
Refrain: Fà-ill ill, O-ho-ró:
Solo: Tha’n lâ’n diu fuar ac’.
Refrain: O hì, ho-rionn o-hó,
Chorus: Hi ri ri ho-ro- gù,
Fàill ill O-ho-ró.
Chaidh fear mo thighe-s’ ann;
Caol mhala gun ghruaman:
Sealgair ’an ròin teillich thu;
Is na h-eilide ruaidhe;
Is na circeige duinne thu,
Nì a nead ’s a luachair.
Sealgair an sgairbh dhoilleir thu
Fo sgàile Ghars-bheinn hhuaradaich,
Is na bânag aird gì thu
Bho ghlumagan ga sguabadh.
’S cinnteach do lâmh chomasach
Air ràn m’r stuidhan uaine.
Rì taobh do shaidh, coinnle brianain,
A’ ghealach nad shìùil a’ luasgadh.
Chì mi air an oidhche thu
Seachad Eilean Shòdhaigh.
Bidh thu ann ad acarsaid
Am fear a sheas ri cruadal.

The Men Have Gone to Scavaig
The men have gone to Scavaig;
For them this day is cold.
The goodman of my house went there;
He of the slender eyebrows, showing no frown.
Hunter of the blub-cheeked seal art thou,
And of the red hind,
And of the little brown hen
That makes her nest among the rushes.
Hunter of the dark cormorant art thou,
Under the shadow of chilly Gars-bheinn,
And the silver sea-trout
That leaps from the deep pools.
Sure is your useful hand
On the oar against the steep waves.
Around your prow is phosphorescence,
The moonlight shaking in your sail.
I will see you tonight
Passing the Island of Soay.
You will be in your anchorage,
The man who can stand up to hardship.

The last six stanzas are by the present author. Four stanzas are too few to serve a useful purpose as a work song, for whatever type of repetitive work. In adding extra stanzas, attention had to be given to the singer’s perspective (the rower’s wife), the over-all theme (hunting), the marine environment (challenging), and the specific attributes of the area, including the species likely to be hunted and their likely locations.

The surviving traditional stanzas praise the hunter. With the other men he is hunting seals (now very numerous at Loch na Cuilce at the head of Loch Sgathabhaig, but formerly kept under control), the red hind, and the little brown hen that nests in the rushes – possibly snipe but it is not clear what species is meant. The new stanzas follow the same verbal pattern, hunting shags which are numerous on the skerries in the shadow of Gars Bheinn, and sea-trout which leap from deep pools. The Coire Uisge river is primarily a sea-trout river, though the increase in seal numbers has diminished the fish numbers substantially. The sixth stanza praises the hunter’s rowing abilities in the “confused seas” referred to above, and the seventh envisages phosphorescence and moonlight as the boat returns in the approaching dark. This takes it past the Island of Soay to reach its anchorage at Rubha an Dùnain via the channel constructed to lead from the sea to the freshwater Loch na h-Airde. The channel and boat noosts can still be seen.

Chaidh na Fir a Sgathabhaig is full of realities. This paper has drawn attention to the realistic aspects of rowing songs not so readily understood today when removed in location and physical experience from their contexts. Sadly, even when rowing songs were a vital part of maritime activity, they were prone to misunderstanding by visitors such as the poet Alexander Smith, a regular summer visitor to Skye in the 1850s and 1860s:

> The wind came only in intermitting puffs, and the boatmen took to the oars. The transparent autumn night fell upon us; the mainland was gathering in gloom behind, and before us rocky islands glimmered on the level deep. To the chorus of a Gaelic song of remarkable length and monotony the crew plied their oars... (Smith 2004: 84)

Smith’s use of the words “remarkable length and monotony” are revealing. It has not occurred to him to inform his reader that it may sound monotonous because he cannot understand Gaelic, or that the length implies both the long memories of the oarsmen and the fact that the length keeps them going. As far as Smith is concerned, their labour is a given and the efficacy and appeal of the singing is judged only by his own limited comprehension. Such witless condescension is, alas, with us still.

Although this paper is about Hebridean rowing songs, the bagpipes were also used to assist rowers and are not out of place in this discussion, for pipers do not “play” the pipes: they “sing” them — seinn in place of cluich. The best known of pieces for Highland bagpipe associated with rowing is the piobaireachd, MacLeod’s Salute, also known as MacLeod’s Rowing Pibroch. This tune certainly has an obsessive melody and rhythm to it. It is a strong, almost harsh piobaireachd which accumulates tremendous energy as the variations gather in complexity — the usual procedure in piobaireachd. Jimmy MacIntosh records Bob Nicol swaying as if he were rowing as he played. The great Highland bagpipes are one instrument which can rise to the acoustic occasion of rowing in rough
weather: but there comes a point in MacMhaighstir Alasdair’s poem, referred to above, when the storm they encounter is at its height and is so savage that song would have been torn from the singers’ mouths and it would be a brave piper who would take his place in the bow, and a brave crew who could spare a man in such conditions.

Not unnaturally, the emotive power of the bagpipes was exploited for the tourists and found expression in Romantic literature:

The boat in a moment is a bagpipe; and not only so, but all the mountains are bagpipes, and so are the clouds. All the bagpipes in the world are here, and they fill heaven and earth. 'Tis no exaggeration – much less a fiction – but the soul and body of truth. There Hamish stands stately at the prow; and as the boat hangs by midships on the very point that commands all the echoes, he fills the whole night with the 'Campbells are coming,' till the sky yells with the gathering as of all the Clans. His eyes are triumphantly fixed on ours to catch their emotions; his fingers cease their twinkling; and still that wild gathering keeps playing of itself among the mountains – fainter and fainter, as it is flung from cliff to cliff, till it dies away far – far off – as if in infinitude – sweet even and soft in its evanescence as some lover’s lute (Wilson 1868: 385).

The reader may smile; but for those like the present writer who have actually heard Highland bagpipes played over water, whether from the boat or the shore, or defying the screaming of seabirds and the surge of the ocean swell under cliffs, then the smile will be one of recognition.

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ABSTRACTS

This paper considers a number of Hebridean rowing songs and the physical conditions which apply to them, including the type of vessel, cargo, and sea-state and how these might influence musical performance. The varied characteristics of the tunes are considered in their contexts. The paper concludes with a close study of a traditional rowing song which survives with only four couplets, and details how it might be extended to render it usable.

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Mots-clés: Hébrides, chants à ramer, gaélique écossais, Tobar an Dualchais
Keywords: Hebrides, rowing songs, Scottish Gaelic, Tobar an Dualchais

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