

**REVIEW**

Heather Sparling. *Reeling Roosters and Dancing Ducks: Celtic Mouth Music*. Sydney, Nova Scotia: Cape Breton University Press, 2014. Pp. 356. ISBN 9781927492987. \$19.95 CAD.

As an ethnomusicologist who reaches regularly between Scottish and Canadian musical traditions, I was very pleased to have the opportunity to review this book. It was encouraging to see such a coherently presented and thoroughly researched account of a specific musical tradition, which continues to hold great, and increasing, resonance in both Scotland and Nova Scotia. The fact that Sparling has been researching *puirt-a-beul*, “tunes from the mouth,” or Gaelic mouth music, since the late 1990s demonstrates a depth of understanding on the subject, both from a Canadian and a Scottish perspective. Sparling has researched *puirt-a-beul* in both countries, has a good working knowledge of the Gaelic language, and has interviewed numerous practitioners and scholars on related subjects, as well as Gaelic instrumental music, song and dance traditions, and Gaelic language and culture. Throughout the work Sparling includes a wealth of interesting anecdotes from historical resources and more recent interviews, and provides relevant references to other scholarly work into related traditions from around the world. This contextualization of the tradition is an effective way of placing *puirt-a-beul* within a global framework, and Sparling draws comparisons with mouth music traditions in countries including Japan and India as well as vocal genres closer to home, including jigging and *canntaireachd*.

As an ethnography of a musical tradition, *Reeling Roosters and Dancing Ducks* has all the key ingredients—historical and global contextualization, function, musical analysis, performance contexts, related dances and lyrics. To start Sparling discusses a previous lack of scholarly interest in *puirt-a-beul*, the omission of the lyrics from song collections, and the reasons for the dismissal of this vocal genre. In doing so, she goes some way towards explaining why *puirt-a-beul* has been previously overlooked by song scholars. The use of *puirt-a-beul* as a mnemonic device “that

help[s] a person to remember otherwise difficult-to-recall information” (p. 31), is something which she discusses very early in the book. Sparling returns to this subject at a later stage to help explain its dismissal within wider Gaelic song scholarship, especially due to its connections, not with vocal music, but with the instrumental tradition as a learning tool. This is interesting as it is not what enthusiasts of *puirt-a-beul* would necessarily expect. Sparling shows the shift in association from instrumentalists to singers, and also explains clearly how the functions of *puirt-a-beul* have formulated and changed over time to appeal to different practitioners and audiences, and particularly its movement from participatory (after Turino) to presentational music as well as its increased usage in the language classroom. The origins of *puirt-a-beul* have been an area of confusion amongst scholars and musicians, and it was useful to read an in-depth discussion of the two most popular origin theories related to the genre: first, that it emerged in the wake of the Jacobite defeat at Culloden to maintain bagpipe tunes during the proscription of the bagpipes; and second, that *puirt-a-beul* emerged in the nineteenth century to protect fiddle tunes “at a time when zealous religious leaders discouraged secular music and actually burned instruments” (pp. 55-6). Sparling successfully debunks both myths and, instead, offers some less romantic but more likely reasons for the emergence of *puirt-a-beul* among Gaelic-speaking highlanders, such as their mnemonic use for memorizing particular instrumental tunes, their development as silly and nonsensical rhymes created by laypeople for small audiences, and their role in asserting cultural difference from the English-speaking world.

Sparling writes about her own background as a Gaelic learner and teacher and discusses the Gaelic language, its background, and history. Chapters run into each other effortlessly but readers with specific interests will find that individual chapters stand up successfully on their own. The chapters on musical features, lyrics (and how to identify them), and dance detail the changes in roles and composition over time and identify areas, particularly in terms of dance, which would benefit from further research. Sparling’s book will appeal to a wide readership. A few weeks ago, I was visiting the Inverness public library, and noticed

*Reeling Roosters and Dancing Ducks* on display amongst other regional non-fiction titles. The book is highly comprehensive and offers a substantial body of useful information and good reading material for academics and non-academics alike. I expect that *Reeling Roosters and Dancing Ducks* will have wide appeal to musicians, dancers, singers, Gaelic scholars and students, ethnomusicologists and folklorists, Scottish historians, and others with an interest in Gaelic culture and traditions.

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