

**Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist.** By Margaret Fay Shaw.  
Pp. xiv + 306, appendix, notes, bibliography, index,  
map, photographs. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.  
Price not given.

Reviewed by Mary Ellen Brown

**Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist**, in providing the student of British folklife with a compelling introduction to aspects of Scottish Gaelic-speaking culture, also forces a recognition that British folksong includes far more than the usual English language ballads and songs collected and edited by the likes of Herd, Scott, Greig, Sharp, and Karpeles. First published in 1955 by Routledge and Kegan Paul, this book is based on fieldwork undertaken between 1930 and 1935 by the American born Margaret Fay Shaw.

Shaw was not the first to study the folklore, and specifically folksong, of the Hebrides. Earlier, Alexander Carmichael, one of the collectors encouraged by John Francis Campbell of Islay (see his work on Ossianic ballads, **Leabhar Na Feinne**), had gathered much material, some of which was published in **Carmina Gadelica**. In 1911 the Folksong Society had published Gaelic songs originally collected by Frances Tolmie in Skye, with comments and annotations by George Henderson, Annie Gilchrist, Lucy Broadwell, and J.A. Fuller-Maitland. Edited versions of Gaelic songs had also been widely concertized by Marjorie Kennedy-Fraser. Margaret Fay Shaw's work builds on and goes beyond these early approaches to Gaelic song by providing, in a lengthy introduction, a description, albeit brief, of the cultural matrix in which she observed the folksongs and folklore. She had originally intended to limit her study to the songs, but her experience on South Uist and elsewhere in the Hebrides led her to see the songs as an integral part of life and related to other aspects of oral folklore. Like Alfred Williams (**Folk-songs of the Upper Thames**. London: Duckworth & Co., 1923) she uses the introduction, based on extensive knowledge of the land and people, to provide a mini context for the items which form the bulk of the book. Photographs at the conclusion of the work provide visual amplification of the written description.

The bulk of the book surveys the folklore and folksongs extant in South Uist in the 1930's and takes an item-centered approach. Prayers, ballads, proverbs, cures, recipes, stories, and songs are printed in Gaelic and in English translation. All song tunes are transcribed and identified by mode. However, there is no discussion of the guidelines for transcription or translation. Sometimes the informant's name and residence are given, and additional material is provided. Where comparative material exists, as in Aarne-Thompson tale type numbers or in earlier work in Scotland, the appropriate reference is given; thus the book offers a bibliographic introduction to the relevant studies of Scots Gaelic folklore and folklife. There are ample references to John Lorne Campbell, Shaw's husband, who is certainly one of the unsung heroes of Scottish folkloristics. Early collector of Scots Gaelic materials with a stress on informants (see *The Furrow Behind Me, An Autobiography of a Hebridean Crofter*--Angus MacLellan), Campbell has engaged in explorations of the history of folklore study (see *Fr. Allan McDonald of Eriskay, 1859-1905: Priest, Poet, and Folklorist* and, with Trevor H. Hall, *Strange Things: The Story of Fr. Allan McDonald, Ada Goodrich Freer, and the Society for Psychical Research's Enquiry into Highland Second Sight*), has edited early historical works (see the Folklore Society Mistletoe Series for Campbell's edition of James Kirkwood's *A Collection of Highland Rites and Customs*), and has encouraged many fledgling folklorists. In 1947 he established the Folklore Institute of Scotland to encourage the study of folklore, and he has been involved in the development of the School of Scottish Studies.

The central portion of Margaret Fay Shaw's *Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist* is devoted to songs, categorized by content and theme (praise, war, exile, lament, hunting, lore) as well as by function (milking, sailing, dancing, spinning, waulking). The latter seem to dominate, and songs from the women's tradition of waulking--shrinking cloth--are the most extensive. In the case of waulking, more than the tunes and texts are provided. Shaw says that the songs "are given in the order in which they might naturally be sung at a waulking." Analysis of this order indicates that waulking may have been framed by songs dealing directly

with tweed making and waulking, with predominantly lyric songs dealing with love and its complications and death, especially by drowning, in the middle. In the late 1960's the School of Scottish Studies made a film on waulking using former participants in this now dead tradition. The film, plus information such as that provided by Shaw, are of great importance in reconstructing contextual aspects of waulking. Many of the songs continue to be sung today in **ceilidh** and in more formal performance contexts.

Ideally a book which deals directly with song should be accompanied by record as is Robin Morton's **Come Day, Go Day, God Send Sunday** (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973) in the Leader record of the same name--Leader LEE 4062. Fortunately, some parallel material which gives an indication of the sound of the music is available; most notably in the two records prepared by the School of Scottish Studies and distributed by Tangent records: "Scottish Tradition 2: Music from the Western Isles" and "Scottish Tradition 3: Waulking Songs from Barra."

The limitations of **Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist** reflect the time in which it was undertaken. The lore and songs are isolated and detached, though the ethnographic and general contextual information provide a valuable introduction. It is unfortunate that Shaw did not take the opportunity of the second edition to describe the changes which have occurred in South Uist and the state of tradition today. Recognizing these factors, however, does not diminish the worth of the book; it introduces the general student to some valuable and beautiful folkloric material which survives translation to enrich our understanding of a rich and compelling aspect of Scottish culture.