

Stanfordian Thoughts
A periodical series of reflections on recorded and unrecorded works by Stanford

by Christopher Howell

14. Songs of a Roving Celt

Stanford's first biographer, Harry Plunket Greene, commented that the First World War drew from the composer "one or two *pièces d'occasion* ... but for the most part his creative mind went its accustomed way"¹. In reality, Stanford's response to the war, humanly and musically, was complex, extending to works written in the following years and embracing some that were not ostensibly war-related². The latter may include *Songs of a Roving Celt*, op.157, a song cycle completed in April 1918. This drew upon a volume of verse published in 1916 by Murdoch Maclean³. Its apparently autobiographical effusions of a Scot who has travelled the world and is now returning sadly home, his illusions smashed and leaving behind him a companion buried at sea, allude only in passing to the war, at least in the poems selected by Stanford. It nevertheless struck a chord at a time when so many soldiers were dying at the front or returning home bereft of much-loved companions. Both of Stanford's own children had been sent abroad, Guy to the front in the 3rd Battalion of the Devonshire Regiment, though he had to be invalided home with acute appendicitis, Geraldine as a nurse in France⁴. Guy and Geraldine returned home, but many of Stanford's students, as well as the sons of his fellow musicians, died at the front or returned with experiences from which they never recovered⁵. It may be relevant, too, that in 1913 Guy had been sufficiently unwell for a voyage around the world to be deemed necessary for his health, financed at some sacrifice by Stanford himself⁶. This could have given the composer at least a subliminal additional cause to identify with Maclean's poetry.

Before discussing *Roving Celt* further, I have tried to place it in context by putting together a chronology of events in Stanford's life during the last eighteen months of the war, and for some time after it⁷:

? May 1917, completed Night Thoughts op.148 (MS missing)

The fifth piece is recycled from the unpublished op.42.

29 May 1917, completed Organ Sonata no. 1 op.149 (pub. 1917)

¹ Harry Plunket Greene: *Charles Villiers Stanford*, Edward Arnold 1935, p.267.

² Lewis Foreman discusses a number of Stanford's war-related works in *British Composers and the First World War: Some works for revival during Centenary events* in BMS News 140, January 2014, pp.120 et seq.

³ Murdoch Maclean: *Songs of a Roving Celt*, Year Book Press, 1916.

⁴ Greene, *ibid.*, p.268. According to Paul Rodmell, *Charles Villiers Stanford*, Ashgate, 2002, p.297, it was the 1st Battalion, and he quotes a plausible source. Jeremy Dibble, *Charles Villiers Stanford, Man and Musician*, OUP, 2002, pp.419, has evidently found the answer to this discrepancy, for he tells us that Guy initially enlisted in the 3rd Battalion but was transferred to the 1st.

⁵ The list would be a long one. In particular, Stanford's successor at Trinity College, Alan Gray, lost two of his sons, Maurice and Edward, within a short space of time. Their initials are among those at the head of the Third Piano Trio, op.158. The B flat minor prelude from op.163 is also dedicated to the memory of Maurice Gray. The tragic post-war history of Ivor Gurney is well known.

⁶ Dibble, *ibid.*, p.418.

⁷ This was not easy, since I needed to take into account (a) published or unpublished works of which a dated manuscript exists, (b) published works of which the manuscript is missing but which have the date of composition, usually just the month, printed at the end of the score, (c) published or unpublished works with an opus number for which no evidence exists of the composition date, other than that which may be deduced from the opus number, (d) published works without opus number for which the only evidence of the date of composition is the date of publication.

3- 11 June 1917, completed *Scènes de Ballet* op.150

(In the printed copy, the last piece has the date of Jan. 1917. Maybe the printers misread Stanford's handwriting).

? August 1917, completed *Organ Sonata no. 2 "Eroica"* op.151 (pub. 1917 MS missing)

? September 1917, the Stanfords moved out of London to Windsor on doctor's orders

? November 1917, completed *Organ Sonata no.3 op.152 "Britannica"* (pub. 1918, MS missing)

Published in 1917, without opus number, composition date unknown:

St. George of England (song)

The Grand Match (Irish folksong arr. For voice and piano)

Sailing Song (2-part song)

Aviator's Hymn (voices and organ)

5 January 1918, completed *Ballata and Ballabile* for cello and orchestra op.160 (unpublished)

20 January 1918, *Verdun* (two movements orchestrated from the *Organ Sonata* op.151 conducted by Landon Ronald (RAH). The MS of the orchestral score is undated.

22 January 1918, completed *Irish Concertino* for violin, cello and orchestra op.161 (unpublished)

? January 1918, completed *Organ Sonata no.4 op.153 "Celtica"* (pub. 1920, MS missing)

? January 1918, completed *Six Irish Sketches* for violin and piano op.153 (pub. 1918, incomplete MS survives)

There are two op.153s and no op.154. Presumably one of these two should really be op.154.

?? *Six Sketches* for violin and piano op.155 (pub. 1919, MS missing)

?? *Ten Partsongs* op.156 (unpublished, MS missing)

3 March 1918, completed *Lighten our darkness, Anthem* (unpublished)

? April 1918, completed *Songs of a Roving Celt* op.157 (pub.

22 April 1918, completed *Piano Trio no. 3* op.158 (pub. 1918)

? May 1918, completed *Organ Sonata* op.159 "*Quasi una fantasia*" (pub. 1921, MS missing)

22 May 1918, conducted *Verdun* and *Irish Rhapsody 5*, Bournemouth Municipal Orchestra

29 May 1918, Windsor, completed *Ballata and Ballabile* op.160, cello and piano score (unpublished)

30 July 1918, completed *Violin Concerto no. 2* op.162 (unpublished, only short score exists)

September 1918, completed *24 Preludes for Piano* op.163 (pub. 1919, MS missing)

September 1918, completed *Magnificat* op.164 (pub. 1919, MS missing)

?? completed 2 *Sonatas* for violin with piano accompaniment op.165 (unpublished, MS missing)

7 October 1918, death of Parry

16 October 1918 Funeral of Parry

11 November 1918, First World War ended.

4 December 1918 *Irish Concertino* performed in (Stanford's) version for violin, cello and piano by Margaret Harrison, Beatrice Harrison and Hamilton Harty (Wigmore Hall)

Published in 1918 (without opus number, composition date unknown)

The Fair Hills of Ireland (song)

St. Andrew's Land (song)

Wales for Ever (song)

A Japanese Lullaby (song)

3 2-part songs (*The Haymaker's Roundelay, The Rose upon my Balcony, Claribel*)

There is no land like England (unison song)

Choral Prelude on "*Why does the azure deck the sky*" (organ), written for Parry's funeral

6 Sketches – Primary (piano)

6 Sketches – Elementary (piano)

?? completed *String Quartet no. 7* op.166 (unpublished, MS undated)

21 February 1919, *String Quartet no.7* op.166 performed at RCM

6 March 1919, Irish Concertino performed in (Stanford's) version for violin, cello and piano by Sybil Eaton, Felix Salmond and Hamilton Harty

3 May 1919, Ballata and Ballabile and Sonata op.165 no.2 performed by Beatrice Harrison, Murray Lambert and Hamilton Harty at the Wigmore Hall

25 June 1919, completed String Quartet no.8 op.167 (unpublished)

A minor oddity is that opp. 160 and 161 jump sequence. The cello and piano version of op.160 appears chronologically in the right place, though, so perhaps Stanford waited to have both versions ready before attaching an opus number. We do not have a dated manuscript for the violin, cello and piano version of op. 161, so maybe something similar happened here. There seems also to be an implausible concentration of works completed in January 1918. My article on *Songs of Faith* showed that this cycle took form over several months. Perhaps this teaches us that sets or cycles of short pieces need not have been written consecutively over a brief period, so the completion date only tells us when the last one was written.

I provided a similar chronology of the years 1905 to 1906 in the 13th article in this series. Ostensibly, Stanford was more prolific in 1917-1918, but many of the works from this period are relatively small. Stanford was increasingly seen as a yesterday's man. Commissions for large choral works had dried up and big orchestral works were becoming harder to place. Moreover, time lay on his hands. The Royal College was still open, but with so many students conscripted the number of lessons taught had dwindled. This also meant a loss of income, partly made up by the string of smaller works and teaching pieces, for which a ready market still existed. Aside from this, it can be seen that works with clear war connotations, such as most of the Organ Sonatas, jostle with titles that seem almost escapist. The flush of Irish works may reflect another contemporary political development which affected Stanford deeply – the Irish Declaration of Independence on 24 April 1916, followed by internal strife that would lead inexorably to the creation of an independent Ireland. A move that Stanford had always opposed with all the vitriol his tongue was capable of. So, while Maclean's Scottish Celt returned home, however sadly, Ireland could no longer be a home to Stanford.

The name of Murdoch Maclean has remained alive – just about – thanks to two brief poems frequently anthologized: *The Tartan* and the Scottish lullaby *Sleep Weel*. To these may be added *The Pibroch*, used for the opening song of Stanford's cycle, which never entirely fell from view even when the composer's reputation was at its lowest. Another major composer who set a poem by Maclean was Edmund Rubbra, whose song *A Duan of Barra'*, op. 20 was published in 1928⁸. Maclean followed *Songs of a Roving Celt* with *From Croft and Clachan* (Deane, 1919) and, much later, *The Wind in the Heather* (Eneas Mackay, 1931). Many of the poems, before they were gathered into the three volumes, had appeared singly in magazines or newspapers. *A Duan of Barra'*, for example, was first published in the *Glasgow Herald*. An attempt to publish a novel in 1949 was unsuccessful.

Unsuccessful, too, have been most attempts to provide dates or biographical details for Maclean. But the Internet is an amazing resource, and a thread in a discussion group led me to a contribution by the poet's great-granddaughter, Melinda, who was able to offer at least minimal facts⁹. I have fleshed these out with a few other plausible details that emerged from the same thread.

Maclean was born in Strathcarron in 1885. He became an orphan at quite an early age and was brought up by an aunt and uncle. He spoke Gaelic – some of his poems seem almost bilingual. He enrolled at

⁸ This poem was also set for female chorus and orchestra by Erik Chisholm in 1946.

⁹ <https://mudcat.org/thread.cfm?threadid=160733>, retrieved 16 July 2022.

Edinburgh University but did not complete his course, perhaps sent down for not attending classes. He became engaged to Jeanne (or possibly Jean) Renwick but it was fifteen years before they were able to marry. He was not allowed to serve in the First World War because of a heart valve problem caused by a bout of scarlet fever when he was a boy. Murdoch and Jeanne moved south to Leeds in the 1920s where he found work as a clerk, possibly in an insurance office. In 1924, the Macleans were living at 17 Hollingwood Lane, Bradford, Yorkshire¹⁰. They had three children, Murray, Donald and Jean. Murdoch Maclean died in 1956. At the time of his death, they were living at 10 Mayville Terrace, Leeds 6. He and his wife are buried in Lawnswood VW Cemetery, Leeds, Yorkshire¹¹. According to his daughter Jean (later Jeanne), he enjoyed the social life, played the fiddle and did not do much work.

The same thread reproduced a slightly different account, given orally at a meeting of the Clan MacRae. I quote it since not all the details are mutually incompatible¹². One that is, is the claim that he “saw service in the First World War”. My real reason for mentioning this probably inaccurate bio is for the evidence it provides that, during the brief period in which *Roving Celt* caught the imagination of the times, it was assumed that he was himself a roving Celt who had suffered in the war. Much as many believed that the First World War poet Rupert Brooke had died fighting, when in fact he died of an infection from a mosquito bite. In reality, Maclean does not seem to have roved much further from his native land than Leeds. This does not make him a fraud, however. So far as is known, he never claimed the *Roving Celt* poems were autobiographical. More likely, they represent a fictional response to his disappointment at having been found unfit for service. The subsequent oblivion of his poems is understandable. Read as literature, they are unremarkable. Seen in the light of oral poetry traditions, though, they stand up more strongly, for their phrases and rhythms roll round the tongue as oral poetry should. *The Tartan* is a classic case of a poem that looks wretchedly vacuous on paper, yet can set the Celtic blood running if recited with a rolling Scottish accent.

One downside of having discovered Maclean’s year of death is the realization that his works will still be copyright until 2026. In the following description of Stanford’s songs, therefore, I shall have to limit myself to paraphrasing the poems, quoting only occasional lines according to the principle of “fair use”.

1. The Pibroch

Maclean’s opening words – “The pibroch, man, the pibroch!” – and his closing line – “Let us go” – have led some to suppose that the Celt has a companion beside him¹³. It becomes clear in the second song of the cycle that the companion is dead and the Celt is returning home alone. The poem expresses his excitement at hearing once more the pibroch as he re-enters Scotland. The bulk of the poem – excepting only the introductory and closing lines – is another case of “oral poetry”. The first, second and fourth line of each verse finishes with the words “in it”, while there is an internal rhyme in each third line. Here is the first verse:

¹⁰ This is according to *Who’s Who in Literature*, ed. Mark Meredith, Literary Year Books Press, 1924, p.258. This same entry gives 1887 as his year of birth. Since the gravestone site (note 11) admits that dates of birth have been calculated from the supposed age at the time of death, 1887 is not impossible. More curiously, this 1924 entry lists *The Wind in the Heather* among his works, though according to the British Library entry it was published in 1931. Perhaps an earlier, privately printed, edition was not sent to the BL.

¹¹ <https://it.findagrave.com/memorial/227674026/murdoch-maclean>,
<https://www.gravestonephotos.com/public/gravedetails.php?grave=106416>, retrieved 16 July 2022.

¹² Murdoch was born in Coillerigh, near Killilan, at the head of Loch Long, and was educated in the small school of Killilan. After leaving school at the age of 14, he served as a clerk to a firm of lawyers in Newcastle, and later saw service in the First World War. He wrote three books of poems which deal with conditions in his native Kintail and the Highlands. His poems are still available and most of them are worthwhile reading. Although he worked all his life in the Northeast of England, he returned each year to his native Glen Elchaig in Kintail.

¹³ For example, Gerald Moore in *Singer and Accompanist The Performance of Fifty Songs*, Methuen, 1953.

*There's breath of moor and ben in it;
And sough of Highland glen in it,
There's battle roar by sea and shore
And tramp of marching men in it.*

Five verses following this scheme may seem doggerel to an armchair reader, but in a public reading the effect could be exciting and Stanford makes poetry of the repeated tag. His opening evocation of the bagpiper, with flattened sevenths against a constant drone, is simple but inspired. Another composer might have had the pibroch playing all through, creating an over-complex texture. Stanford's bagpiper comes and goes with the wind, leaving the singer free to muse over a simple but urgent accompaniment. Exceptionally poetic is Stanford's handling of the last two lines, as the bagpiper recedes into the distance, the key changes and the singer intones in an irregular but memorably melodic phrase:

*The silver dew of night are softly falling,
The stars are on the heather – let us go.*

2. Assynt of the Shadows

That final call – “let us go” – is answered by the bleak chords that open this song. The poem describes the burial of the Celt's companion in the bay beneath the shadow of Assynt. Here is the third verse:

*The shroud is white before my straining vision
(My heart is sore, mo bhron¹⁴, my heart is sore).
The woven shroud that soon must wind for ever
The sailor's corse¹⁵ that heaves beyond the shore.*

This second line in brackets is the same in all four verses, once again an effective device in oral poetry – and a sung text – though trite as literature. Stanford drives home the point that the companion is a sailor who died at sea by quoting from “Fare Well”, the last of his *Songs of the Fleet*, at the end of the first verse. Once we have heard this, we realize that the sombre opening chords were themselves a variant of the “Fare Well” motif. After the spare accompaniment of the first two verses, Stanford increases the tension with triplet arpeggios for the third and provides a magically impressionist depiction of the “deathly mist” of the fourth.

3. The Sobbing of the Spey

This poem relates how Scotsmen leave their own country, often without returning, but wherever they are, they do not forget “their own romantic river” or fail to hear “that homeland call”. While the Spey itself is ever lamenting:

*“Bring me back my sons and daughters,
Children of a vanished day;
For the sorrows haunt the waters
In the sobbing of the Spey”.*

¹⁴ = alas

¹⁵ = corpse

Stanford sets the first part of each verse in semi-recitative style, expanding melodically towards the end. He rarely came so close as here to writing a sentimental ballad. He gets away with it because his ritornello-like theme for the voice of the Spey is so achingly beautiful.

4. No More

After two elegiac songs, this one breaks in passionately and dramatically. It describes a number of highland scenes, stormy and peaceful by turns, but whatever the Celt sees, his overriding thought is “But Angus never turns him home again to Morven”, varied at the end to “And ocean voices wail his coronach in Morven”. This is the one poem, of those selected, that hints, in the third verse, at a war background:

*For out beneath the war-cloud's reddened awning
Where fate is nigh,
Where hearts are steel'd, and eager steeds are fawning
And brave men die,
He softly sleeps, nor wakes to see the dawning
In the grey sky.*

We normally think of Stanford as a Victorian or Edwardian composer, his pupils and their generation constituting the Georgians. Yet the second verse, where gentle chords paint a rapt pastoral atmosphere while the voice describes the scene in melodious semi-recitative, somehow encapsulates the entire ethos of what we think of as Georgian:

*The browsing flocks upon the hillsides roaming
Have sought the crest,
The lowing kine have left the field as gloaming
Fades in the West;
And down the vale the wind-tossed bee is homing
To its long rest.*

5. The Call

An abrupt change of tonality from D minor to D flat major is perhaps intended to separate this song from the preceding ones, giving it the air of an epilogue. The Celt, having said his farewell to his companion, now returns sadly homewards to the Isle of Skye:

*I am weary of the striving
After fortune's flitting smile,
With the great man's cruel driving
And the poor man's hopeless toil,
And I'd be with her who bore me,
With the clouds of heaven o'er me,
And the drifting sea before me in the Kyle.*

He has no illusions:

*Oh! It's hard and scarred and lonely,
That cold island in the foam,
And its sons know manhood only
That their eager feet may roam.*

But it is home.

The piano's rippling triplets contrast throughout with the simple quavers (quarter-notes) of the voice, giving the impression of free conversational musings on the part of the singer that gradually rise in tension to a powerful, if resigned, climax. As remarked above, Maclean's Celt returned home, however sadly. Stanford knew he never would. He makes this point by quoting, in the piano postlude, from his earlier song *Back to Ireland*, the last of the *Irish Idyll* cycle, op.77 (c.1901). In that song, he joyfully embraced the return. Here the motif is choked before it reaches its climax, ending on a note of longing.

It is understandable that *The Pibroch* enjoyed a popularity and a life independent of the rest of the cycle. It is perhaps the song most suitable for extraction as a stand-alone. The others all gain from their context, and in those days it was uncommon to perform song cycles in their entirety¹⁶. Today it is the norm to give cycles and sets complete, so perhaps it is time to take another look at *Songs of a Roving Celt*¹⁷. It is a well varied, consistently inspired and moving cycle, typically Stanfordian in its Celtic content, while its Scottish subject matter makes it unique in his output¹⁸.

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Previous articles

1. [Phaudrig Crohoore: An Irish Ballad for chorus and orchestra, op.62](#)
2. [Chamber Music with Strings](#)
3. [The Second Violin Concerto: Did the full score ever exist?](#)
4. [Irish Rhapsody no. 5](#)
5. [Smaller Orchestra Works](#)
6. [Fairy Day](#)
7. [Not-quite-concertos](#)
8. [Partsongs](#)
9. [Stanford's most-played work](#)
10. [A Child's Garland of Songs op.30](#)
11. [God and the Universe: which version came first?](#)
12. [To the Soul. Did Stanford or Vaughan Williams get there first?](#)
13. [Songs of Faith](#)

¹⁶ For example, an unidentified three from the cycle were performed by George Parker at an Enoch Ballad Concert in Westminster's Central Hall on 20 November 1920. It is not clear who the pianist was. John Ireland accompanied two of his own songs, so maybe he played for the entire concert.

¹⁷ A first complete recording will shortly be issued by Da Vinci Classics, sung by Elisabetta Paglia (mezzo-soprano), accompanied by the undersigned.

¹⁸ His only other specifically Scottish songs were stand-alones: *Dainty Davie*, to a text by Burns (1905) and *St. Andrew's Land*, to a pseudo-Scottish text by the English poet C. Fox Smith (1918). *A Child's Garland of Songs* has texts by Robert Louis Stevenson but without any Scottish content. He set two texts by the Scottish-born W.H. Ogilvie, *The Hoofs of the Horses* (1923) and *Coo-ee* (pub. 1927) but the subject matter is Australian. Likewise, he set Thomas Carlyle's *Sower's Song* (pub. 1927), but there is no specifically Scottish content either to the words or the music. He also set Sir Walter Scott's *Allen-a-Dale* as a three-part song with alternative accompaniment for two violins (1922).