

"Songs and Tunes Can Go Two Ways":
The case of Manx *Ushag Veg Ruy* and
Scottish Gaelic *Uiseag Bheag Dhearg*

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"Songs and tunes can go two ways". This was how Mona Douglas (1898-1987) characterised her experience in the Isle of Skye, she told me during I visit I made on her at her home in Ballaragh, Lonan, in the summer of 1974, in her capacity as Hon. Secretary of the Manx Branch of the Celtic Congress, which she held from 1917 to 1952. She said that this position enabled her to visit the Celtic countries of Man, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Cornwall and Brittany, where she would come into contact with the song and dance traditions of those countries.

Mona told me that on a visit to the Isle of Skye, seemingly around 1920, in the above capacity, she sung at a cèilidh song session the Manx traditional lullaby *Ushag Veg Ruy ny Moaney Dhoo* 'little red bird of the black turf-ground'.¹ Her Skye audience were apparently so enthralled with the song, probably because the text was so easy to understand, that a Scottish Gaelic version came out some years later. In fact, according to Ms. Morag Macleod of Scalpaidh, Harris, an acknowledged authority on the Scottish Gaelic song tradition, formerly of the School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, a Scottish Gaelic version entitled *Uiseag Bheag Dhearg na Mònadh Duibh*,² with the same meaning as the Manx version, was produced by an aunt of a member of the Scottish Gaelic traditional music band *Na h-Òganaich* ('the young ones') (1971-), and I well remember the Scottish Gaelic singer Anne Lorne Gillies singing it one time on the Scottish television programme '*S e ur Beatha* ('you're welcome') in 1975.

As can be seen, the text of *Uiseag Bheag Dhearg* is in reality a direct translation of the Manx version. The tune sung to the Scottish Gaelic version is the same as that sung to *Ushag Veg Ruy*. This can be easily seen from the appended texts and tunes of the two versions. At the 2016 *Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig* ('researching Gaelic') Conference held in Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, Isle of Skye, 21-24 June 2016, a Gaelic speaker from Strathspey in his fifties sung me part of *Uiseag Bheag Dhearg* as he drove me home from a cèilidh; he said he had learned the song while at school.

Interestingly enough, this story featured in Ruairidh Macghill-Leathain's *Litir do Luchd-Ionnsachaidh* (Letter for Gaelic learners') No. 416, the BBC Radio Scottish Gaelic learners programme, broadcast on 7 August 2014.

As Mona said, "songs and tunes can two ways", and in this regard she said she had brought tunes back with her to Man and made use of them in her efforts to revive Manx traditional songs and dances for school children.

¹ For the full text see A. W. Moore (1896): *Manx Ballads and Music*. Douglas, pp. 42-43.

² The text to this song, along with a sound-recorded copy of the tune, also in staff-notation, can be obtained from the following website: <http://www.mamalisa.com/?t=es&p=1209> .