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Marine Melodies: Traditional Scottish and Irish Mermaid and Selkie Songs as Performed by Top Female Vocalists in Contemporary Celtic Music

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University Honors Scholars Program
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"Stories from traditions are magic—because they are given to you as a present—you are let into the personal lives of your friends. You are accepted as one of the family. It is my deepest responsibility to tell the story again to you with love and respect for their forbears."- Duncan Williamson, *Tales of the Seal People*

Abstract

Mermaids and human-seal hybrids, called selkies, are a vibrant part of Celtic folklore, including ballad and song traditions. Though some mermaid and selkie ballads have been studied in-depth, there is a lack of research comparing the ballads to each other or to contemporary renditions of the same material. This research will compare traditional melodies and texts of the Child Ballads "The Mermaid" and "The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry," as well as the traditional Scots Gaelic song "Hó i Hó i," to contemporary recordings as performed by top female vocalists in Scottish and Irish music today.

The texts and melodies I have identified as my "source" material are those most thoroughly examined by early ballad and folklore scholars. The source material for "The Grey Selchie of Sule Skerry" derives from a transcription by Otto Andersson in Flotta, Orkney in 1938. My source for the notation and text of the more elusive "The Mermaid" comes from the first version of the ballad included in the Greig-Duncan Collection. The melody of "Hó i Hó i," which was first collected by folklorist David Thomson and published in 1954, will serve as my source version. Modern recordings included in the study are "The Mermaid" by Kate Rusby, "The Grey Selchie" by Karan Casey with the band Solas, and "Òran an Ròin," a version of "Hó i Hó i," by Julie Fowlis.

This study compares the forms, melodic contours, and texts of these traditional and contemporary versions, examining ways in which contemporary recordings have maintained the integrity of traditional songs and ballads from which they are derived while adapting them to draw in a contemporary audience. The thesis illustrates the continued and evolving presence of mermaids and selkies in Scottish and Irish song.

Introduction

For at least the past 500 years, marine human-animal hybrids such as mermaids and their selkie counterparts have been a vital part of folklore in Irish and Scottish coastal and island communities. It is doubtless that the romantic beauty of mermaids and selkies has solidified their presence in the cannon of local legends. These creatures have captured the imaginations of countless generations, including our own. Even in silence, they weave written words into music.

Part human and part seal, selkies fill a similar role to mermaids. However, unlike the mermaid, the selkie cannot take on the physical characteristics of a human and a sea creature simultaneously and must instead transform between them. The name "selkie," sometimes known under the variants "silkie," "silchie," "selchie," or "sealchie," is, according to renowned Scottish story collector Duncan Williamson (1928-2007), derived from the seals' soft, sleek coats.[1] However, folklorist David Thomson notes that though "selkie" is the local name for any seal, it is only certain seal species to which supernatural notions have been attached.[2] For the purposes of this study, "selkie" refers to human-seal hybrids.

Selkies can transform at specific times, times which are disputed amongst story tellers, and they do so by shedding or donning their "seal skins." Since they are commonly cast as humans' lovers, it is unsurprising that humans sometimes steal selkies' skins to prevent them from returning to the sea. According to folklorist Ernest Marwick (1915-1977), most selkie stories come from the Orkney and Shetland Islands of Scotland and many are associated with

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[1] Williamson, "Introduction," 1.
[2] Thomson, *The People of the Sea*, xxii.

these islands' five-hundred-year-old Nordic heritage. However, selkies have also been rumored to inhabit the Western Islands of Scotland and the West Coast and Aran Islands of Ireland.

Folklorists such as David Thomson (1914-1988), writer of the 1954 ethnographic book *People of the Sea*, which tracks tales and songs of selkies from all over Scotland and Ireland, note that people are drawn to seals because of their human qualities: emotion-filled eyes, a love of music, and the empathy they seem to have for humans and each other. Thomson suspects that this is the reason so many legends exist of people who experienced bad or even deadly luck after killing a seal for food, blubber, or a pelt. Because the seals seemed so much like people, their deaths were more than a routine act of hunting; they were akin to murder. One of the songs which this study will examine, "Hó i Hó i," was transcribed in Thomson's book and is narrated by a seal lamenting the murder and consumption of her kin.[3]

Though the term "mermaid" may sound more familiar than "selkie," traditional Scottish and Irish mermaids are unlike the figures that are romanticized today. Instead, they often result in or foretell the downfall of men. Irish mermaids are known as "merrows," while some Scottish mermaids, particularly from the northern islands of Orkney and Shetland, are known as "Finfolk." They live in pearly, golden, jewel-encrusted, underwater kingdoms, where the occasional human guest is taken for a visit. Sometimes visiting men are enchanted by the spell of a beautiful and possibly malignant mermaid.[4] Other times curiosity drives them to visit willingly.

In one story recounted by folklorist Thomas Crofton Croker (1798-1854), a human man living on the seaside befriends a merrow man and travels with him to his dwelling in the sea. The human is disturbed to learn that his otherwise kind merrow friend owns a chest full of drowned

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[3] Thomson, *The People of the Sea*, 254-256.
[4] Dennison, "Orkney Folklore—Sea Myths," 23.

sailors' souls. Fearing for their salvation, the human tricks the unwitting merrow, steals the souls, and releases them. The merrow is never any the wiser.[5] Other stories of merrows are nearly identical to those of trapped selkie wives, but instead of a skin, it is a cap or scale that the merrows need in order to return home and that human men steal to capture them. Traditional Irish and Scottish mermaids also serve as harbingers to sailors of a coming storm. Folklorist Stephen Winick notes that while the mermaids themselves are not the cause of deadly weather, sailors loathe to see them on the horizon.[6]

There are two terms, with their many meanings and connotations, which require explanation for the context of the current study. According to James Porter, the term "Celtic," in Britain and Ireland, refers largely to the language family that includes Irish, Scots Gaelic, Welsh, and Breton. It is mainly in North America that the term refers to artistic endeavors and other traces of culture from Ireland and Scotland in particular.[7] To define Celtic music, Porter quotes music historian Frank Harrison, who broadly describes the style as "those musical practices in Celtic or partly Celtic regions which have, or had, some characteristics differentiated to recognisable extents from those in contemporary non-Celtic societies."[8] Porter discusses the term's different usage in the USA and Canada, where it refers simply to "national or regional musics" of Ireland and Scotland.[9] In this study, the term "Celtic" is used in the North American sense, though I have tried to avoid the term where possible to avoid ambiguities.

"Tradition" is another slippery word with an infinite number of faces. Henry Glassie defines tradition as "the creation of the future out of the past." He goes on to explain that

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[5] Croker, "The Merrow," 30-52.
[6] Winick, "'The Mermaid.'"
[7] Porter, "Introduction," 208.
[8] Harrison, "Celtic Music: Characteristics and Chronology," cited in Porter, "Introduction," 210.
[9] Porter, "Introduction," 210.

"tradition is the opposite of only one kind of change: that in which disruption is so complete that the new cannot be read as an innovative adaptation of the old."[10] Contemporary scholar Simon McKerrell of Newcastle University corroborates Glassie's claim that change and tradition are not opponents but partners, asserting that:

> "…the tension between the traditional and the modern or contemporary has been both crucial to those that place themselves at the heart of the tradition, at the boundaries of the traditional practice or beyond. But a perspective of traditional culture that places it in binary opposition to commercial culture has been too simplistic for some time."[11]

In other words, though there are many perspectives on how best to honor or maintain tradition, some scholars argue that tradition and the contemporary are not true opposites. McKerrell and Glassie agree that change is a part of tradition. Glassie notes that people retain the parts of a practice that they best remember or most wish to recreate. Therefore, tradition reflects our composed images of the past. Additionally, it is not only acceptable but expected for tradition to evolve. Given each of these things, writes Glassie, scholars and music appreciators must bear in mind that our picture of tradition is an incomplete and romanticized history–much as history is limited by memory.[12]

In this study, I am adopting Glassie's definition of "tradition." With their romantic image, selkies and mermaids have remained a cultural presence throughout their evolution. In Scottish and Irish society, where music flows forth like the waters of the Clyde or the Liffey, it is only natural that the role of mermaids and selkies extends to traditional ballads and songs. There are a

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[10] Glassie, "Tradition," 395.
[11] McKerrell, "The People of Scottish Traditional Music," 93.
[12] Glassie, "Tradition," 395.

handful of extant ballad texts about each, though many of these ballads have no traceable tunes. One of these tuneless ballads, for instance, is “Clark Colven,” or “Clerk Colvill,” which was collected by Sir Francis James Child (1825-1896) and published in his work, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. It tells of a man who courts both a mermaid and a human at the same time, is cursed by the mermaid for his iniquities, and dies the next day.[13] Contemporary ballad singers may create their own melodies or set the text of “Clark Colven” to the tunes of other Child ballads. Unfortunately, without its traditional tune, it is impossible to make musical comparisons between the original and contemporary versions of “Clark Colven.”

There are several traditional mermaid and selkie songs whose older melodies have been preserved. This small cannon includes two widespread Child ballads as well as a handful of more obscure local songs, most of which are in Gaelic. One such ballad, “The Mermaid,” Child 289[14], is sometimes called “Three Times Round Went the Gallant Ship.” It can also be found in the *Grieg-Duncan Folk Song Collection*, compiled by musician and scholar Gavin Grieg (1856-1914) and folk song scholar J.B. Duncan (1848-1917). A study from folklorist and ethnomusicologist Stephen Winick shows that “The Mermaid” has seen a wide diaspora from England and Scotland to Appalachia, the Ozarks, and other parts of the world that were heavily settled by the Scottish, English, and their descendants.[15] Unsurprisingly, then, the ballad has devolved into a variety of melodies and texts. It tells of a ship that is sunk by a deadly storm. Just before the storm hits, one of the sailors spies a mermaid sitting on a rock and combing her hair. Though mermaids themselves were not considered dangerous in this strand of the folklore

[13] Bacchilega, “Clark Colven, Child 42 A,” 41.

[14] The Child ballads are numbered 1 - 305. Many of the ballads exist in multiple versions, which are listed, for example, as 1A, 1B, etc.

[15] Winick, “‘The Mermaid.’”

tradition, they were thought to be portents of bad luck for sailors. Since being performed by popular Celtic artists in the past several decades, "The Mermaid" has garnered a new popularity, having been transformed during the folk revival of the 1960s and '70s by acclaimed musicians like the Clancy Brothers and Paul Clayton.[16]

"The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry," Child 113, is at least as widespread as "The Mermaid." It is sometimes called "The Grey Selkie of Sule Skerry," and spellings of the words "gray" and "selkie" may vary. Like "The Mermaid," "The Great Selkie" has several variants with different texts and tunes. Dr. Alan Bruford (1937-1995), former senior lecturer and archivist at the School of Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh, provides a clear scope of these variants in "The Grey Selkie," included in the Folklore Society's *Ballad Studies*. According to Bruford, one must take each "traditional" text with a grain of salt. Many of the texts were incomplete and scholars have had to fill in missing words and phrases.[17]

The storyline of "The Great Silkie" follows a young woman who, walking along the shore, meets and falls in love with a selkie in his human form. The two make love and the woman becomes pregnant. When the selkie man disappears, his lover does not realize where he has gone until she recognizes him during a brief visit in his seal form. Seven years later, the selkie again visits the shore, putting a gold chain around the neck of his son and taking him back to the sea. The selkie prophesizes that the woman will marry a "gunner good," and the woman's human husband will unwittingly shoot both the selkie lover and his wife's selkie son. All the selkie's predictions come true and the woman identifies her son by the gold chain around the

[16] Winick, "'The Mermaid.'"
[17] Bruford, "The Grey Selkie," 52.

small, slain seal's body.[18] Many notable artists have recorded "The Great Selkie," including American folk singer Joan Baez, who titled her version "Silkie." Baez's rendition popularized the melody composed by James Waters of Columbia University in the 1950s. It is the melody adopted in most contemporary recordings of the song.

As for Gaelic language songs related to selkies, the most accessible transcriptions, text, and scholarship come from Thomson's *People of the Sea*.[19] Thomson provides melodies, Gaelic texts with their translations, and information on where and from whom each song was collected. One such song to be examined is "Hó i Hó i." The song, whose title is nonsensical, is narrated by a selkie inculpating killers of her kind. She refers to the slain seals as "human beings" and wonders angrily how anyone could eat them.[20] Perhaps because of their Gaelic nature or due to my own search through primarily English-language sources, this song and others gathered by Thomson appear to be under-researched.

In undertaking this study, I have sought examples in the work of other ballad scholars. In "Simon Fraser's *Airs and Melodies*: An Instrumental Collection as a Source of Scottish Gaelic Song," Mary Anne Alburger uses Fraser's titles to pair melodies with traditional Gaelic language texts, which Fraser, who only collected the melodies themselves, considered unworthy of recording.[21] Francis J. Fischer examines the Nordic connections in Scottish ballads through comparisons of Nordic and Scottish texts, tracing language roots, and studying their shared patterns of content in "Scotland's Nordic Ballads."[22] Alan Bruford compares varying texts and

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[18] Bruford, "The Grey Selkie," 47.
[19] Thomson, *The People of the Sea*, 254-256.
[20] Thomson, *The People of the Sea*, 254-256.
[21] Alburger, "Simon Fraser's *Airs and Melodies*," 319-333.
[22] Fischer, "Scotland's Nordic Ballads," 307-317.

melodies of "The Grey Selkie" in Emily Lyle's *Ballad Studies*.[23] These models have helped determine a pathway for examining the three songs included in this study.

Many scholars have gathered and studied "The Mermaid" and "The Great Silkie," and many singers have vocalized them. There have been text and melody comparisons of varying renditions from many communities. Though the songs are rarely and perhaps never compared to each other, these thorough studies have traced the origins and histories of individual songs, sometimes even referencing recordings from the mid-to-late twentieth century. However, despite erudite work surrounding the tales and tunes of selkies and mermaids, no research has been conducted on contemporary adaptations of such songs among the most respected Celtic artists of the twenty-first century.

Because selkies and merrows are so often associated with women, it only seems appropriate to focus on the performance of these songs by female singers. This study will examine the arrangements of traditional Scottish and Irish mermaid and selkie songs by some of the most respected contemporary female vocalists in Celtic music. Songs to be included are "The Mermaid" as recorded by Kate Rusby[24], "The Grey Selchie" as recorded by Karan Casey with the band Solas[25], and "Òran an Ròin" as recorded by Julie Fowlis.[26] Fowlis's song is a modern arrangement of the Gaelic seal song from Thomson's book. This study aims to examine the ways that these three women have adapted text and melody to recreate folk songs to appeal to contemporary listeners while maintaining the rich folklore traditions behind the recordings.

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[23] Bruford, "The Grey Selkie," 41-65.
[24] Rusby, "The Mermaid."
[25] Solas, "The Grey Selchie."
[26] Fowlis, "Òran an Ròin."

Literature Review

Folktales and Legends of Celtic Mermaids

Called “merrows” in Ireland, the “Fin Folk” in Orkney, and the “merfolk” in other parts of Scotland, mermaid and mermen go by several titles between these sister cultures. The mermaids are normally described as having long green or yellow hair, which they frequently comb from perches on rocks near the shore. Most have the torso of a human and are naked from the waist up. Below the waist is a fish’s tail, which is sometimes described as a long, clinging garment. Some mermaids are the size of a child with a woman’s breasts, exhibiting little beauty until somehow transformed into a seductive human. The mermaids’ actions and intentions toward humans, as varied as their appearances, are sometimes benevolent and sometimes malevolent. Most merrows are female, but many are male. In the face of generalizations, the vastly diverse roles of the merrow defy stereotypes.

The folklorist who perhaps captures this multiplicity most effectively is Robert Chambers (1802-1871), who writes in *Popular Rhymes of Scotland* of several scenarios involving mermaids. In one tale, a local mermaid instructs a man in how to save his dying fiancé. In another, a mermaid emerges from the Firth of Clyde to tell a funeral procession how to prevent others from dying of consumption like the person they are mourning.[27] Conversely, when a local woman tires of her baby being awakened by another mermaid’s singing and destroys the rock that the “Mermaid of Knockdolion” normally sits on, the vengeful mermaid curses the baby, causes its death, and brings barrenness upon the family.[28] In another of Chambers’ stories, “Laird

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[27] Chambers, *Popular Rhymes of Scotland*, 331.
[28] Chambers, *Popular Rhymes of Scotland*, 331-332.

Lorntie" is rescued by a servant when he falls for a malicious mermaid's ruse as an innocent young woman drowning in a pond.[29]

Another collection that captures the diversity of Celtic mermaid lore is also one of the earliest. Thomas Crofton Croker included a set of five stories under the category "The Merrow" in his *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland*. This volume is widely considered Ireland's earliest folklore study and one of its best. One tale included by Croker is closely related to the common story of the selkie bride entrapped by a human after he steals her seal skin. "The Lady of Gollerus" features a beautiful young merrow who must wed the human Dick Fitzgerald after he steals her *cohuleen driuth*, the enchanted cap which allows her to return to the sea.[30] Like most mermaids and selkies from similar stories, the Merrow has no name. Fitzgerald finds the Merrow sitting on a rock and combing her long, green hair. Though she weeps from sorrow and fear at the loss of her cap, Fitzgerald refuses to return it. The two are wed and live happily together with many children, and the Merrow seems the ideal wife. One day while Fitzgerald is away at work, the Merrow finds her cap in a tangle of fishing nets. After contemplating what to do next, she sorrowfully kisses her children goodbye, resolves to come back and visit the family, dons her cap, and dives back into the sea. Her life and family on the shore are quickly forgotten, leaving Dick and their children in mourning.

"The Lady of Gollerus" closely resembles the Scottish "Mermaid of Kessock," which was first recorded by Ronald MacDonald Robertson and recently recounted by Cristine Bacchilega and Marie Alohalani Brown in *The Penguin Book of Mermaids*. In it, a man named Paterson spots a Highland mermaid and takes a scale from her tail, the equivalent of the merrow's cap.

[29] Chambers, *Popular Rhymes of Scotland*, 332.
[30] Croker, "The Lady of Gollerus," 4.

The mermaid transforms into a beautiful woman and Paterson falls immediately in love with her. Despite her pleading, he refuses to return the scale, instead hiding it in his outhouse and taking the reluctant merwoman as his wife. After many years of longing for the water, the mermaid finds that her scale has been discovered by her young son. She quickly puts on the scale and rejoins her underwater community. Unlike the Lady of Gollerus, however, the Mermaid of Kessock supplies Paterson and their children with fish and protects their descendants for the rest of her life.[31]

Croker's "The Lord of Dunkerron," written as a poem in ballad form, also tells of a human-merrow love affair. After a man and merrow fall in love on the shore, the merrow says that she must visit her father to obtain permission to wed her lover. The merrow never returns.[32] Yet another human man and merrow woman are united in "The Wonderful Tune," in which a merrow falls in love with a champion bagpiper and schemes to bring him back to the sea as her husband.[33]

A similar story to "The Wonderful Tune" exists in Scotland. Walter Trail Dennison provides a retelling in his "Orkney Folklore—Sea Myths" chapter of *The Scottish Antiquary, or, Northern Notes and Queries*. In it, a "Fin woman" kisses and enchants a handsome, strong, and happily engaged human, dragging him back to her lavish underwater kingdom of pearl, gold, coral, and crystal.[34] The spell is broken when a prescient black cat scratches the man's forehead. He returns to land, marries his human fiancé, and forgets about the Finfolk and the "Finfolkaheem" where they dwell. This story and that of Croker corroborate Earnest Marwick's

[31] Bacchilega, "The Mermaid of Kessock," 29-30.
[32] Croker, "The Lord of Dunkerron," 59-66.
[33] Croker, "The Wonderful Tune," 67-82.
[34] Dennison, "Orkney Folklore—Sea Myths", 19.

statement that mermaids are drawn to human men, normally sailors, and trick them into romantic engagements. Marwick's mermaids, however, normally drown their love interests.[35] But it is not only men who are captured by mermaids. In "Merman Rosman," recounted by John Masefield in his 1906 book *A Sailor's Garland*, a young woman is kidnapped by a merman and taken to his underwater castle. Years later, the woman's youngest brother comes across her while searching and is captured as well. After fifteen years, the two escape and return to their mother.[36] In *Cavan Folk Tales*, Gary Branigan provides a retelling of "The Mermaid and the Princess," in which a large and vicious mermaid kidnaps the newlywed daughter of a king. When her husband comes to the shore to lure the mermaid out of the water and attack her, he is overpowered and taken back to the mermaid's castle to join his wife. The couple escape with the aid of a dwarf living in the castle. It is unclear what the mermaid plans to do with her captives, but she clearly poses a threat to them.[37]

To return to Croker's tales, other stories diverge entirely from this stereotypical human/fish romance. In "Flory Cantillon's Funeral," a family lay their relative, Flory, to rest in the family graveyard, which has been flooded and permanently submerged off the coast of County Kerry. Because the use of old family burial places is a deeply rooted tradition in that part of Ireland, the Cantillon family continues to "bury" their loved ones there by leaving coffins at the edge of the shore for the tide to carry out overnight. When an in-law comes into town for Flory's funeral, he decides to keep watch on the shore to learn what really happens to the coffins. Late that night, he hears a beautiful and ethereal "keen." Soon after, a group of human-like

[35] Marwick, "Kingdoms of the sea," 24.
[36] Masefield, "Poems of Mermaids and the Sea Spirits," 232-234.
[37] Branigan, "The Mermaid and the Princess," 105.

figures emerges from the sea. They speak of a merrow princess who long ago married into the Cantillon family and was buried in their graveyard. Her father took the graveyard into his waters after her burial and the merrows have since been bound to see that the Cantillons are properly laid to rest there. When the merrows see the human man standing on the shore, they announce that their obligation has been broken by his presence. They retreat into the water and Flory is the last Cantillon buried in the ancestral resting place.[38] This relates to another of Croker's selkie tales whose plot does not rely on romance. In it, a human man who befriends a merrow, visits him in his lavish underwater kingdom, and learns that he has entrapped the souls of drowned sailors in a treasure chest. Disturbed by the iniquity of his otherwise congenial friend, the human sets about freeing the souls so they can ascend to heaven.[39]

It is interesting that, according to some traditions, especially in Shetland, mermaids cannot breathe underwater for extended periods. Their homes beneath the sea lie on a plane of dry land beneath the meniscus of the ocean's waters. To reach the shore and interact with humans, they must possess the body of a fish or some other being.[40] The ancestral kingdom of the merrow in Croker's "The Soul Cages" is one of these dry underwater dwellings.[41]

Clearly, merrows serve a breadth of purposes in traditional Irish folklore. But fish women have also appeared there in other forms, as in W.B. Yeats' telling of "The White Trout." In the tale, a beautiful woman is engaged to a king's son when the man is murdered and thrown into a stream. Soon after, a trout of an unnatural white hue appears in the same waters. Locals leave the fish alone until one day, a soldier of questionable character catches the fish and goes to cut it.

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[38] Croker, "Flory Cantillon's Funeral," 21-29.
[39] Croker, "The Soul-Cages," 30-58.
[40] Black, "Superstitions Generally: Selkies," 170-171.
[41] Croker, "The Soul-Cages," 39.

From the fish arises a horrendous scream, just before it transforms before the soldier's eyes into a lady dressed all in white. Her arm is bleeding, and she indignantly insists that the soldier put her back into the water. If she stays away for too long, she explains, she may miss her true love passing by: the event she has been awaiting for years. She threatens that the soldier will pay if he causes her to miss her lover. The soldier fearfully renounces his iniquitous ways and tosses the woman, now a fish once more, back into the water. The white trout remains in the stream and forever bears a white scar on its side. [42]

Folktales and Legends of the Selkie

Selkies, like mermaids, serve a variety of functions in Irish and especially Scottish folklore. They are perhaps even more romantic than mermaids in their scarcity: selkie stories are native only to the Scottish Highlands and Islands, Ireland, Norway, and Iceland. As mentioned in the introduction, people from the coastal and island regions of Ireland and Scotland have a special relationship with seals. In his book, *People of the Sea*, Thomson makes an especially clear case for their importance within Scottish and Irish communities. "As to the seals themselves," he notes, "no scientific study can dissolve their mystery. Land animals may play their roles in legend, but none, not even the hare, has such a dream-like effect on the human mind; and so, though many creatures share with them a place in our unconscious mind, a part in ancient narrative, the seal legend is unique."[43] Thomson points out that seals capture a mysticism not felt about the most legendary land animals. Their significance lies in the spell they have woven over humans for generations.

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[42] Yeats, "The White Trout," 366-368.
[43] Thomson, *The People of the Sea*, xxi.

Throughout *The People of the Sea*, Thomson describes people who he has met both in his personal life and in his career as a folklorist who have had a connection to seals. Some claim to have seen selkies on the shore while others suspect that round, gray-haired neighbors with expressive eyes could be selkies themselves.[44] A handful of families in the West of Ireland and the Hebrides of Scotland, according to Thomson, are said to be descended from selkies.[45] *People of the Sea* also tells of a human baby, presumed dead, who was said to have been discovered alive and healthy after being nursed by a seal cow. As an adult, this child was an exceptional swimmer.[46]

Because seals have such a perceived innocence and are closely interwoven with seaside communities, tales abound of seal hunters who are punished for killing them. As Duncan Williamson states in *Tales of the Seal People*, “The seals or silkies will never do you any harm, not unless you are bad to them. Then they set out to teach you a lesson.”[47] In one tale, a man kills a baby seal for its silky pelt, still white with youth. In the spot of the killing, the hunter meets a woman who tells him that he will die within a year. Both the man and his son drown exactly a year later.[48] Sometimes the “lessons” Williamson references are gentler. In “The Silkie Painter,” Williamson tells of a young selkie who clandestinely transforms into a human and wins the affection of an old fisherman with no son. The fisherman has always hated selkies because they tear his fishing nets, but the young selkie man is determined to change his mind.[49]

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[44] Thomson, *The People of the Sea*, 4.
[45] Thomson, *The People of the Sea*, 211 and 198.
[46] Thomson, *The People of the Sea*, 125-128.
[47] Williamson, “Introduction,” 2.
[48] Thomson, *The People of the Sea*, 104-111.
[49] Williamson, “The Silkie Painter,” 5-15.

This theme of selkies earning the respect of, or being spared by, humans is also shown in a Thomson retelling, in which a hunter discovers a seal on the beach and is poised to shoot her until she cries out, begging him to spare her life so that she can nurse her baby one last time. The startled hunter leaves and never harms another seal.[50] Seals are said to mourn their slaughtered kin, crying out their names in a "humanlike keen" on the beach.[51] This emotional occurrence reminds seal hunters of something chilling: that "the eyes of the seal," as stated by a ferryman encountered by Thomson, "are the very same as a man's eyes."[52]

Some tales hold that skinning a selkie does not kill it but deprives the selkie of its ability to return home to the sea. In Marwick's collection, a drowning hunter is rescued by a seal during a storm. When the pair reach the shore, the selkie asks for a favor in exchange: that the human return the seal skin belonging to the selkie's wife. The man goes home and unearths the skin. When he arrives on the beach, a beautiful woman stands bare skinned in the open air. The human hands the woman her skin, which she slips into before going to her husband.[53]

These are tales of selkie interactions, but they do not explain the creatures' origins. The 1903 collection *Examples of Printed Folk-Lore Concerning the Orkney and Shetland Islands* by Scottish American archivist George Fraser Black (1866-1948) and English anthropologist Northcote Whitridge Thomas (1868-1936) is an authoritative source for selkie origin stories. Black and Thomas detail some of the characteristics of selkies, explaining that only the large, gray seals can be selkies and not the smaller "tang fish." Eligible seals are the grey seal, the great seal, the Greenland seal, the crested seal, and the rough seal. The authors believe selkie lore in

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[50] Thomson, *The People of the Sea*, 130.
[51] Thomson, *The People of the Sea*, 129.
[52] Thomson, *The People of the Sea*. Edinburgh, 141.
[53] Marwick, "Kingdoms of the Sea," 28.

Scotland is very old and they provide legends of the selkie's origins. Some say that selkies are fallen angels whose crimes did not merit being cast into hell; others claim that selkies were humans facing castigation for some iniquity.[54] Thomson, in turn, writes that in Orkney, seals were thought to be the souls of the drowned.[55] These selkie Genesis stories contrast with the down-to-earth origins provided by Duncan Williamson: that selkies were a natural coping mechanism for loved ones lost at sea. It was comforting for the bereaved to think their friend or family member was gone to be with the selkies.[56]

Black and Thomas compare selkies to the Finfolk. Both male and female selkies are exceptionally attractive and capable of enticing humans with their beauty, as are the seductive mermaids. But selkies, say Black and Thomas, are not usually found combing their long hair, and unlike the more solitary mermaid, are normally spotted in groups. Given the previously recounted mermaid tales, it is noteworthy that solitude in mermaids seems to be specific to Scotland and especially Shetland and Orkney. Selkies are not considered members of the Finfolk and do not dwell in the Finfolkaheem. Instead, they can be found on rocks called "skerries," or "skurries," which protrude from the sea a distance from the shore. Black and Thomas believe that most folklorists never realize the difference between selkies and the Finfolk, attributing this oversight to a self-imposed distance from the "peasant" communities. They also note that many locals are hesitant to give up their stories to those they do not trust, which may affect the quality of any folklore collected.[57]

[54] Black, "Superstitions Generally: Selkies," 170-171.
[55] Thomson, *The People of the Sea*, 225.
[56] Williamson, "Introduction," 1.
[57] Black, "Superstitions Generally: Selkies," 170-171.

Selkies are normally found basking in the sun together on skerries (or, according to other folklorists, on the shore), their coats lying nearby to assure a quick escape from any sudden threat. Though it is generally agreed that they can only transform during certain dates, periods, or points in the tidal cycle, Black notes that the frequency of transformations is disputed and ranges from every few weeks to every few years.[58]

Black and Thomas tell a story that readers of selkie and mermaid lore should by now find familiar: that of the selkie woman held hostage as the wife of a human who has stolen her seal skin. In "The Goodman of Wastness," a bachelor spies a group of naked selkie women lying on a rock off the shore. He creeps up to the rock unseen, emerges, and grabs a seal skin before its owner can reach it. Once the other selkies have dived back into the water, one heartbroken selkie woman remains. Despite her pleas for freedom, the "Goodman" will not relinquish the pelt. Instead, he speaks to her of love and convinces the selkie to marry him. The selkie woman makes a good wife and mother to Wastness and their seven children, but she never stops staring longingly at the sea. This is evidenced by the selkie traditions she shares with her children. She "[teaches] her bairns[59] many a strange song, that nobody on earth [has] ever heard before."[60] One day while her husband is away, the selkie woman asks one of her children if she has seen the pelt. The girl, having no knowledge of the garment's significance, points her mother to the seal skin. The selkie woman dives back into the sea and is reunited with her selkie lover.

In Scottish folklore, there is also a strong tradition of love affairs between selkie men and human women. The latter are normally unfulfilled married women, or young maidens who long

[58] Black, "Superstitions Generally: Selkies," 172.
[59] Children.
[60] Black, "Superstitions Generally: Selkies," 175.

to be married and are seeking sexual satisfaction.[61] According to Black, women have only to cry seven tears into the sea at high tide for a selkie lover to appear.[62] One such woman in a selkie tale, as recounted by Black, is Ursilla, the daughter of an Orkney laird. After marrying a servant of low social standing, she is unhappy in her marriage but is too proud to divorce her husband beneath the scrutinizing eyes of the community. Instead, she seeks refuge in the love of a selkie man. At high tide on an early morning, Ursilla cries seven tears into the sea to summon a seal lover. At each springtide, Ursilla and the selkie enjoy a romantic rendezvous. Each of Ursilla's children is born with webbed fingers and toes. Legend says their descendants still bear traces of this characteristic.[63] Marwick cites another story in which a woman takes a seal for her lover and gives birth to a child with a seal's face. Her lover comes to her in a dream to impart the whereabouts of a secret store of silver which he has buried to aid in the child's upbringing.[64]

Mermaids and Selkies in Song

Selkies and mermaids have a rich heritage not only within Celtic folktales but within Irish and Scottish folksong, particularly Scottish balladry. Thomson argues that these songs have likely survived longer than most related tales. He notes in his Forward that in the 1940s when he began his research for *The People of the Sea* in Ireland, young people had already become uncomfortable with all but the music of their ancestral folklore tradition. "And now, so far as I can perceive," Thomson comments, "there remains with the exception of religion and language no direct cultural link with the past. Only traditional music has survived and been revived."[65] Thomson's comment reveals the importance of music as one of the last cultural ties to a time that

[61] Black, "Superstitions Generally: Selkies," 176.
[62] Marwick, "Kingdoms of the Sea," 28.
[63] Black, "Superstitions Generally: Selkies," 177-179.
[64] Marwick, "Kingdoms of the Sea," 28.
[65] Thomson, *The People of the Sea*, xx.

most young people are forgetting. Readers can gather that these songs are precious relics of the past.

It is appropriate that mermaids and selkies should be represented in song because both are said to have close associations with music. Williamson says that "…seals are awful fond of music, any kind, even whistling or singing."[66] He fondly remembers evenings when his father played the bagpipes for seals on the shore. Similarly, Thomson attests that seals can be coaxed to shore by talented singers. He provides a melody called "The Fisherman's Song for Attracting Seals."[67] While rumors abound that seals can keen melodies back to singers, Thomson concedes that this is untrue, as seals cannot match pitch.[68]

Mermaids are also known for their musical connection. There are many stories in which mermaids are heard singing ethereally, another favorite activity to undertake from their coveted rocks. In Croker's "Flory Cantillon's Funeral," the family member who spies the merrows hears an unearthly singing as they approach. The man who visits the merrow in "The Soul Cages" learns many a song while in the underwater kingdom. In Dennison's story of a Fin Woman who enchants and captures a human man, the Fin Folk sing an elaborate song at a gathering in their Finfolkaheem, and the protagonist of Croker's "The Wonderful Tune" catches the merrow's attention through his superb skill as a bagpiper.

Though mermaids and selkies are represented in folk song, their recorded presence there is narrower than one might imagine. The ballad collections of Francis James Child and Grieg and Duncan have preserved the texts of several related ballads, such as Clark Colvill. Fortunately, a

[66] Williamson, "Introduction," 2.
[67] Thomson, *The People of the Sea*, 254.
[68] Thomson, *The People of the Sea*, 253-254.

few tunes have been saved as well, including several to accompany "The Mermaid" and "The Great Selkie." Otherwise, the findings in David Thomson's "Music of the Seals" chapter from *The People of the Sea* are among the only traceable songs about the seal folk and mer-people.

Literature in Ballad Studies

As Scottish folklorist Thomas A. McKean states in his introduction to *The Flowering Thorn: International Ballad Studies*, ballad scholarship is an interdisciplinary field, calling upon musicians, historians, literary experts, and ethnologists, to name a few. *The Flowering Thorn* is divided into five sections of five studies, each by a different scholar. Section subtitles are "interpretation of narrative song," "structure and motif," "context, version, and transmission," "regions, reprints, and repertoires," and "the mediating collector." These divisions represent the major trends in contemporary ballad studies.[69]

Ballads, says McKean, see changes in culture and trends through time as they move "…back and forth between oral and written traditions, and maintain a fierce existence in the modern world, coming into bloom when sung."[70] As they pass between oral and written traditions, decades and centuries, communities far and wide, songs evolve. This nonlinear journey leads to what McKean refers to as the "cultural stability" of ballads, which gives them the endurance and popularity to join and remain in the canon of tradition.[71] Simply put, ballads avoid obsolescence by adapting to changing times. Scholars, according to McKean, seek to interpret and make meaning of ballads. McKean invokes a sentiment first expressed by Barre Toelken: that ballad scholars now have the freedom to make meaning from these musical and

[69] McKean, "Introduction," 1.
[70] McKean, "Introduction," 2.
[71] McKean, "Introduction," 2.

textual relics that were once considered crude and unworthy of study.[72] McKean also recognizes that despite whatever scholarship may exist surrounding ballads, it is in performance that the ballads "bloom" as they were created to do.

Internationally renowned Scottish ballad scholar Emily Lyle agrees that ballads make for a complex area of study. Lyle emphasizes that our knowledge of ballads is extremely limited because ballads live among the people of today and yesterday, and in keeping with any folklore tradition, each time a ballad is sung is different from the last. There is no singular recording which holds the truth of a ballad and therefore what collectors gather can only be a snapshot of its existence.[73] Lyle notes that Scottish ballads are no exception. With some ballads dating back as far as the late Middle Ages, centuries of undocumented, informal performances stand behind each one.[74] The age of these ballads has another significance. According to Lyle, ballads tell of "…a world where kings and shepherds, ladies and dairy maids are juxtaposed and where the everyday is mingled with various kinds of 'otherness,' including what was already 'long ago' for the singers. Now their present, too, has become the past, and since the boundaries of the everyday have shifted so violently since the time of horseback travel, we experience a ballad world which has a much greater degree of otherness than it once had."[75] This otherness creates interest for those who stumble across ballads. Signs of age in content and language are part of what makes them so romantic.

Lyle and McKean agree that while texts, transcriptions, and other content found in the pages of books are invaluable tools, ballad scholars must not forget that ballads are ultimately a

[72] McKean, "Now She's Fairly Altered Her Meaning: Interpreting Narrative Song," 19.
[73] Lyle, "Introduction," 10.
[74] Lyle, "Introduction," 9.
[75] Lyle, "Introduction," 18-19.

musical tradition and should be considered accordingly. To understand and represent ballads well, scholars must seek to experience their actualization in performance, however incomplete an image those performances may provide.[76]

Songs Used in the Current Study

"The Mermaid"

"The Mermaid" was transcribed with text in the collections of both Grieg and Duncan and Child. Grieg's collection contains at least three separate tunes and even more texts of "The Mermaid" and "Three Times Round Went the Gallant Ship," another name by which "The Mermaid" is sometimes known. Child's collection also includes a variety of texts for the ballad that date back to 1765, earning "The Mermaid" the designation of Child 289. It has been traced from its origin point on the isle of Great Britain into North America and collected in Appalachia and the Ozarks by Cecil Sharp and Alan Lomax during the first half of the twentieth century.[77] Bertrand Harris Bronson notates dozens of melodies and their corresponding texts in his 1964 collection, *The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads*: *With Their Texts, According to the Extant Records of Great Britain and America*.[78] He also notes at least eight titles by which "The Mermaid" has in some time and place been known.

As with any traditional song, "The Mermaid" has many variants. In its narrative, a ship of sailors passes by a mermaid on a rock. Most versions agree that the mermaid's only action is to hold a glass in her hand and comb her hair, though in some versions she calls out to the sailors and warns them of a deadly fate. However, the mermaid need not speak: the sight of her alone is

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[76] Lyle, "Introduction," 12.
[77] Winick, "'The Mermaid.'"
[78] Bronson, "The Mermaid," 370-387.

considered a bad omen for sailors. Winick observes that she herself is not malicious but a portent of some independent scourge.[79] In most versions, the storm brews and the sailors speak of the people and things they will be leaving behind. Winick speculates that there may be a connection between the belief that mermaids were bad luck and the superstition that having a woman onboard would bring misfortune to a ship.

As "The Mermaid" has many variants, it is notable that it has a close relationship with a handful of other ballads, which likely sprang from the same source. "Sir Patrick Spen," Child 58, briefly discusses a similar situation to "The Mermaid" in certain versions of the text. On a voyage home from Norway, the captain of a ship spies a mermaid with a "glass in her hand," a common description for the title character from "The Mermaid." Patrick Spen's mermaid speaks a warning to the captain, and he bids her be gone. Unfortunately, the mermaid's predictions come true, and the ship sinks in a deadly tempest.[80]

In addition to these older versions of "The Mermaid," a flurry of contemporary variants were developed during the mid-twentieth century. After Irish band The Clancy Brothers recorded a version of "The Mermaid" at a time in which Celtic music had found an audience abroad, the ballad became popularized. The Clancy Brothers borrowed Paul Clayton's 1956 tune and many artists since have followed their lead.[81] However, others have taken a more original approach, further broadening the range of "The Mermaid"'s variants.

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[79] Winick "'The Mermaid.'"
[80] Chambers, "Sir Patrick Spens," 3-8.
[81] Winick, "'The Mermaid.'"

"The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry"

"The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry" is Child 113 and is one of the most referenced threads of Scottish selkie lore. It appears in Thomson's ethnography, Marwick's collection of folklore from Orkney and Shetland, and Black and Thomas's work. In "The Great Silkie," occasionally called "The Norway Maid" or "Sealchie Sang," a woman meets a selkie man on the shore and the two make love. Some variations of the text say that the woman denies a proposal by the selkie man but is in turn denied by him in the years to come. After their child is born, the selkie comes for the boy, who is to live with his father in the sea. The selkie says that in seven years' time, the woman will marry a talented marksman who will unknowingly shoot both the selkie lover and his wife's son. Events unfold just as the selkie predicts.

Alan Bruford provides an especially comprehensive study of "The Great Selkie," examining the textual and melodic variations. He estimates that the ballad is about five centuries old, and that while its words are spoken in Scots, they adorn an older Nordic storyline.[82] There are several different opening stanzas to the ballad, some of which introduce the Maid, some of which are spoken by the Selkie, and others that set the scene. Some of the texts are heavily influenced by Scots- and Northern Isles-specific dialects while others bear greater likeness to modern English. Bruford believes that the differences in the texts and their dialects can help scholars to date different versions.[83] "The Great Selkie" is now most often sung to the tune popularized by Joan Baez's 1961 adaptation, "Silkie." Though Bruford is critical of newer melodies, it is thanks to younger generations of traditional artists that "The Great Selkie" exists widely beyond archival filing cabinets.

[82] Bruford, "The Grey Selkie," 64.
[83] Bruford, "The Grey Selkie," 49.

"Hó i Hó i,"

The songs found within Thomson's "The Music of the Seals" are far more obscure than "The Mermaid" or "The Great Selkie" because they are in Gaelic—which, as ethnomusicologist Mary Anne Alburger notes in her chapter from *The Flowering Thorn*, makes any song under-researched.[84] In the traditional song "Hó i Hó i," a seal laments the killing of her brothers and sisters, likening their slaughter to murder. This aligns with the anxieties that the communities described by Williamson and Thomson have about seal hunting. It also expresses the human sense that the seals are not unlike themselves. Thomson transcribed the song himself as sung by William Matheson of North Uist.[85]

Modern Songs and Singers Examined in the Current Study

According to Danny Carnahan in the 2018 *Acoustic Guitar* journal article "Hall Caledonia," the traditional ballads of Scotland and England, as well as the traditional music of Ireland, boomed in popularity during the 1960s, building an appetite for Celtic folk music which still exists today. Though some musicians chose to incorporate nontraditional elements such as electric instruments, creating genres like folk rock, the songs and their spirit continued to thrive.[86] The current study seeks to understand how this popularity and evolution has impacted and perpetuated three specific mermaid and selkie songs through three modern recordings.

For this study, I will be examining "The Grey Selchie" as recorded by Karan Casey with Solas, "The Mermaid" by Kate Rusby, and "Òran an Ròin," a rendition of "Hó i Hó i" recorded by Julie Fowlis. The contemporary versions that I have chosen to examine have several things in

[84] Alburger, "Simon Fraser's *Airs and Melodies*," 320.
[85] Thomson, *The People of the Sea*, 254.
[86] Carnahan, "Hall Caledonia," 28–31.

common. Firstly, they are all performed by top female vocalists in contemporary Celtic music. Karan Casey (b. 1969) is a two-time winner of the Meteor Ireland Music Awards for Best Irish Female Vocalist and Best Irish Folk Album. She also holds a GRAMMY. Casey has produced five solo albums and served as the vocalist for the award-winning Irish-American band Solas.[87] Kate Rusby (b. 1973) has been nominated for and awarded several folk music prizes and in 1999, at the age of 26, she was named one of the BBC's Top 10 Folk Voices of the Century. Rusby's website notes that she has garnered respect for being both a tradition keeper and a pioneer of folk music.[88] Julie Fowlis (b. 1978) is best known for recording the tracks "Into the Open Air" and "Touch the Sky" for the Disney PIXAR movie *Brave*. But beyond *Brave*, Fowlis is a multi-award winning, highly sought vocalist who has performed at countless high-profile events throughout Europe and the United States. Fowlis's trademark, her website shares, is her performance of almost exclusively Gaelic language song.[89] Casey, Rusby, and Fowlis are all acclaimed not only as vocalists but as folk musicians.

Another shared feature between the recordings examined in this study is their innovative integrity. Each of the vocalists or groups who perform them maintains the message and spirit of the traditional songs, though they do so in unique ways. Some artists choose to modernize the texts so that contemporary listeners can relate to them more easily. Some use traditional melodies while others use newer or original ones. But regardless of their differing artistic routes, these recordings show how the most respected female voices in a generation of Celtic music are keeping selkie and mermaid songs alive today.

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[87] Casey, "Karan Casey and John Doyle."
[88] Rusby, "About."
[89] Fowlis, "About Julie."

Anticipated Findings

I expect to find that some of the artists whose arrangements will be examined in this study have made more changes to the traditional songs than others. I believe there will be a correlation between these findings and the artists' styles as innovators and/or tradition keepers. Fowlis, for instance, is one of only a few Celtic singers known for performing Gaelic language song. Because Gaelic traditional song has neither the popularity or the body of scholarship that is behind the English language songs of Ireland and Scotland, Fowlis is an innovator in her exploration of this field. However, her focus on maintaining the integrity of traditional songs is strong. I expect to find that the melody and texts she uses will be more closely related to those transcribed by Thomson than will be the adaptations by Rusby and Casey to the melodies and texts of their respective songs as gathered by early ethnomusicologists.

In contrast, I expect that Rusby's "The Mermaid" will have modernized the text more than either Casey or Fowlis's recordings. Since the melody seems to have been composed by or for Rusby, it seems that her text will also be uniquely tailored to suit modern audiences. However, since she is lauded for both her loyalty to the folk tradition and her innovative adaptations, I predict that her lyrics will still uphold the essential framework of historically collected texts of "The Mermaid."

Ultimately, I believe I will find that these recordings employ contemporary techniques and styles, not to stray from tradition but to enhance the messages behind the traditional texts of the three songs.

Methods

In this study, I have drawn from the many approaches that ballad scholars take in their studies. The following examples are used to contextualize my own methods alongside those of scholars undertaking similar research. Mary Anne Alburger completed a study entitled, "Simon Fraser's *Airs and Melodies*: An Instrumental Collection as a Source of Scottish Gaelic Song." In her research, Alburger used Fraser's titles to pair the melodies with traditional Gaelic language texts, which Fraser had considered unworthy of recording.[90] Francis J. Fischer examined the Nordic connections in Scottish ballads through comparisons of Nordic and Scottish texts, tracing language roots, and studying their shared patterns of content.[91] Alan Bruford undertook a study for Emily Lyle's *Ballad Studies* that looks comparatively at different extant texts and melodies for "The Grey Selkie."[92]

The current study takes a similar approach to that of Bruford and Fischer: that of comparison between multiple versions of the same ballads and songs. However, it differs from the studies of Bruford and Fischer in its focus on contemporary popular renditions of traditional ballads. The current study, which aims to explore ways in which Casey, Rusby, and Fowlis have maintained and updated traditional approaches in their recordings of "The Grey Silchie," "The Mermaid," and "Òran an Ròin," is a content analysis of the three contemporary recordings next to written records of their traditional counterparts. Because some of these songs, especially the two Child ballads, have many extant versions, I have identified those that have been most thoroughly examined by early ballad and folklore scholars. My source material for "The Grey Selchie of Sule Skerry" was collected by Otto Andersson from Flotta, Orkney in 1938 and

[90] Alburger, "Simon Fraser's *Airs and Melodies*," 319-333.
[91] Fischer, "Scotland's Nordic Ballads," 307-317.
[92] Bruford, "The Grey Selkie," 41-65.

discussed by both Thomson and Bruford. Notation and text from the more elusive "The Mermaid" come from the Greig-Duncan Collection. The selected melody of "Hó i Hó i" was first collected by Thomson, who requested the older melody from the original publisher of the text, William Matheson.[93]

The current study requires transcriptions of the three contemporary melodies as transcribed using a notation software. Also to be examined are recordings of and texts of the selected songs as shared by the artists and their record labels to ensure accuracy. I hope to gather statements from the singers about their relationships to these songs (for example, where they learned them, why they chose to record them, and what other insights they may have into the songs and their significance.). As *The Flower and the Thorn: International Ballad Studies* editor Thomas McKean points out, ballad singers usually possess a well-rounded cultural context and knowledge of how their songs should be executed.[94] Any information from Casey, Rusby, or Fowlis could prove most valuable.

The research and writing of this project should be completed by May of 2021. The most time-consuming component will be transcribing melodies using a notation software. I will lay the contemporary texts and melodies of each song side-by-side, looking for commonalities, differences, and trends in form, melodic contour, and textual content. I will examine whether and how the texts have been converted to reflect changes in modern speech. Lastly, I will compare contemporary versions and their respective divergences from the traditional source material to each other, examining the degree to which each artist maintained traditional qualities of the ballad she recorded.

[93] Thomson, *The People of the Sea*, 254.
[94] McKean, "Introduction," 6.

Analysis

Fowlis and Thomson

David Thomson collected his melody and text of "Hó i hó i" from William Matheson's 1938 book, *The Songs of John MacCodrum,* and later from Matheson personally. According to Matheson, MacCodrum, an 18th-century bard, bore the name of a family line said to have been descended from the seals.[95] In *The Songs of John MacCodrum*, Matheson had published the text and a version of the melody in the book, but he altered the melody to suit another text.[96] He gave the original directly to Thomson upon request.[97] The text, said both Thomson and Matheson, was collected in North Uist and referred to events which had taken place in Orkney.[98] It has only two verses. In contrast, Julie Fowlis's "Òran an Ròin," recorded for the 2017 album *Alterum*, has three verses. It was the otherworldly elements of the song that drew Fowlis to record "Òran an Ròin." "I find the melody so powerful and am fascinated by songs and folklore about the otherworld," shared Fowlis in an email interview with the author.[99] She attributes her own knowledge of selkie lore to three main sources: elders in her home of Uist, personal research, and study through a Master of Arts in Material Culture.[100]

The texts employed by Thomson and Fowlis are rather similar (see Tables 1 and 2). As is explained in the "Song Lyrics and Sleeve Notes" of *Alterum*, "Òran an Ròin" tells a story set in Heisgeir in the Hebrides where a group of hunters who were preparing seal meat heard a seal singing the tune in lament of her slain kinsmen. The notes drifted to the men from a nearby

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[95] Matheson, *Songs of John MacCodrum*, xxxiv.
[96] Matheson, *Songs*, 330.
[97] Thomson, 254.
[98] Matheson, *Songs*, xxxvii; Thomson, 254.
[99] Julie Fowlis in email discussion with the author.
[100] Fowlis in email discussion.

reef.[101] "Òran an Ròin" is that song, narrated by the heartbroken seal. The Matheson text holds that the men were already eating the seal meat when they heard the lament. The first verses of both "Hó i hó i" and "Òran an Ròin" discuss the "pity" of being in a place where "people" are eaten as food. In the second verses, the selkie speaker identifies herself as a "noble woman/gentlewoman from another land," citing her position of dignity. In the third verse, used by Fowlis but not given by Thomson, the seal invokes images of birds that return to their nests and salmon that belong in the sea, drawing a parallel to seals, the sea, the shoreline, and survival at the end of the verse, where the speaker says, "Until Doom's Day I will not be moved." Fowlis's first two verses are the same as the two verses of the Thomson version, barring a few accents and spellings. Table 1 shows Thomson's text and its translation, which Thomson describes as literal. It is unclear whether Thomson or Matheson is the translator.

Table 1		
	Thomson Text (Scots Gaelic)	**English Translation**
Refrain	Hó i hó i hi o hó i Hó i hi o hó ii Hó i hó i hi o hó i Cha robh mi 'm ònar an raoir.	*Hó i hó i hi o hó i* *Hó i hi o hó ii* *Hó i hó i hi o hó i* *Last night I was not alone.*
Verse 1	'S mairg 'san tir, so 'S mairg 'san tir, 'G ithe dhaoine 'n riochd a' bhidh; Nach fhaic sibh ceannard an t-sluaigh, Goil air teine gu cruaidh cruinn.	*It is a pity that in this land* *They eat human beings in the form of food.* *Do you not see the leader of the Seal Host* *Boiling fiercely on a fire?*
Verse 2	'S mise nighean Aoidh mhic Eóghainn, Gum b'eolach mi mu na sgeirean; Gur mairg a dhèanadh mo bhualadh, Bean uasal mi or thir eile.	*I am the daughter of Hugh the son of Owen.* *I know the skerries well.* *Woe betide the person who would strike me* *For I am a gentlewoman from another land.*

It is important to note that the phrase "Hó i hó i" is made up of nonsense syllables, explaining its apparent lack of translation. The Fowlis text, which Fowlis shares was translated to English by

[101] Fowlis, "Song Lyrics and Sleeve Notes."

Jo MacDonald, matches the Thomson text almost exactly, save a few accents and spellings (Thomson's Gaelic text is taken directly from Matheson's).[102] Its translation is also nearly the same:

Table 2		
	Fowlis Text (Scots Gaelic)	**English Translation**
Refrain	Hò i hò i hì o hò i Hò i hì o hò i ì Hò i hò i hì o hò i Cha robh mi 'm ònar a-raoir.	*Hò i hò i hì o hò i* *Hò i hì o hò i ì* *Hò i hò i hì o hò i* *I was not alone last night.*
Verse 1	'S mairg san tìr seo, 's mairg san tìr 'G ithe dhaoine 'n riochd a bhìdh; Nach fhaic sibh ceannard an t-sluaigh Goil air teine gu cruaidh cruinn.	*Pity to be in this place* *where people are eaten as food* *See the chief of the people* *Boiling hard on a fire.*
Verse 2	'S mise nighean Aoidh mhic Eòghainn, Gum b' eòlach mi mu na sgeirean; Gur mairg a dhèanadh mo bhualadh Bean uasal mi o thìr eile.	*I am the daughter of Aoidh son of Ewen* *I was knowledgeable about the reefs* *Pity the person who would hit me* *I am a noble woman from another land.*
Verse 3	Thig an smeòrach, thig an druid Thig gach eun a dh'ionnsaigh nid; Thig am bradan thar a' chuain Gu Là Luain cha ghluaisear mis'.	*The thrush comes, the starling comes* *Every bird returns to its nest* *The salmon comes from the sea* *Until Doom's Day I will not be moved.*

Observers may note that, while Thomson's version has translated the names Aoidh and Eóghainn to the anglicized Hugh and Owen, Fowlis has retained the traditional spellings. This is reflective of Fowlis's long association with the Gaelic language tradition.

The melodies used by Thomson (see Example 1) and Fowlis (see Example 2) are also nearly the same. As is often customary for transcribers, Thomson has "straightened out"

[102] Fowlis in email discussion.

ornamentation and rubato used by Matheson in his singing of the tune. This means that his melody is largely syllabic. The key of the Thomson version most closely translates to D dorian.

Example 1:

Hó i hó i

Trans. by David Thomson

Refrain

Hó i hó i hi o hó i Hó i hi o hó i i Hó i hó i hi o hó i Cha robh mi 'mòn

8 Verse 1

ar an raoir. 'Smairg 'san tir, so'Smairg 'san tir, 'G ithe dhaoin-e'nriochd a'bhidh;

13

Nach fhaic sibj ceann - ard an tsluaigh, Goil air tein - e gu cruaidh cruinn.

A 1954 recording of Matheson singing "Hó i hó i" for reporter James Ross reveals that, at least on that occasion, he was using the same tune that Fowlis applied to her rendition in 2017.[103] According to Fowlis, her inspiration was drawn from versions performed by Matheson as well as Mary Smith and Isa MacKillop.[104] "I probably sing a version which is based on both the Rev William Matheson and Mary Smith (which are both incredibly close anyway)," Fowlis shared in a statement to the researcher.[105]

The key of Fowlis's recording can be most closely defined within the F harmonic minor scale, an alteration of the aeolian mode.

[103] Matheson, "Òran an Ròin."
[104] Fowlis in email discussion.
[105] Fowlis in email discussion.

Example 2:

Òran an Ròin

Trans. By Olivia Phillips

As performed by Julie Fowlis

Refrain

Hó i hó i hi o hó— i Hó i hó i hi hó i Hó i hó i hi o hó— i

7

Verse 1

Cha robh mi 'mòn ar an raoir. 'Smairg'san tir, so 'Smairg'san tir, 'G ithe dhaoin-e

12

'nriochd a'bhidh; Nach fhaic sibj ceann-ard an tsluaigh, Goil air tein-e gu cruaidh cruinn.

The first hint that Fowlis's melody differs from Thomson's appears in mm. 5, when the singer descends to the lowered seventh scale degree, E-flat in this instance, rather than repeating F, the tonic. In mm. 6, Fowlis sings a D-natural, the raised sixth scale degree. Each time the sixth scale degree appears in the melody, it is raised, signifying Fowlis's use of the harmonic minor scale. Fowlis's recording uses ornamentation, which is not reflected in Thomson and Matheson's transcription. Listeners of Fowlis's "Òran an Ròin" will note a fermata or pause at the end of each phrase.

Overall, Fowlis's "Òran an Ròin" is very similar to the Thomson transcription of "Hó i hó i." The texts are nearly identical, despite a difference in the use of accents and Fowlis's recording of a third verse. The two melodies also bear a strong resemblance, with only slight differences between Thomson's dorian transcription and Fowlis's use of the harmonic minor scale. This similarity can likely be explained in two ways. Firstly, it appears that Fowlis has also taken her melody from William Matheson, drawing from another of his variations of "Hó i hó i,"

one that shares the name of Fowlis's own rendition. Secondly, as an almost exclusively Gaelic language singer, Fowlis is a bearer and preserver of tradition. Perhaps, then, she would have sought to represent the folk songs of Scotland with as much truth to earlier versions as possible.

Rusby and Greig-Duncan

Duncan and Greig began their formal collecting in the first decade of the twentieth century, though it was not until 1925 that "The Mermaid" was published in *Last Leaves of Traditional Ballads and Ballad Airs*, a posthumously published collection of songs and tunes transcribed by Greig in Aberdeen.[106] This study examines what will be referred to as "Version A" of "The Mermaid" from *The Greig-Duncan Folk Song Collection*. More than ninety years later, Kate Rusby recorded "The Mermaid" on her 2016 studio album, *Life in A Paper Boat*.

Ron Block, of the group Alison Krauss and Union Station, who joined Rusby's band on banjo in their recording of "The Mermaid," characterizes Kate Rusby's music well, stating, "I love rootedness, and the lack of it always seems a big deficiency in any art. But I love it best when tradition becomes a wide river and flowing source for creativity and innovation, not dammed into a stagnant pool."[107] He describes Rusby's work as "deeply rooted in tradition and simultaneously brand new."[108] Block attributes much of this to Damien O'Kane, multi-instrumentalist, producer, and arranger for Rusby's music.

Both Version A and Rusby's recording tell of sailors who see, or have seen, a mermaid while at sea. In each version, the sailors lament the imminent loss of the people and things they

[106] Greig, Duncan, and Shuldham-Shaw, and Lyle, 504; Olson, "The Influence," 191.
[107] Kidman, "Kate Rusby."
[108] Block, "Five Reasons."

love. The Mermaid's appearance has signaled the coming of a storm that cannot be survived.

Table 1 shows the text of Version A:

Table 3: Greig-Duncan Text	
1. The wind was still and the moon was clear And we were in sight of the land And there we spied a pretty mermaid With a comb and a glass in her hand, her hand, her hand, With a comb and a glass in her hand.	4. She may look, she may sigh with a tear in her eye, She may look she may sigh for me She may look, she may sigh with a tear in her eye She may look in the bottom of the sea.
2. Oot speaks the captain o' oor gallant ship And a well-spoken fellow was he Says I married a wife just three weeks ago And this night a poor widow she'll be.	5. Oot speaks the cook o' oor gallant ship And a rough-spoken fellow was he Says I care as muckle for my pots and my pans As ye dee for your wives all three.
3. Oot speaks the cabin-boy o' oor gallant ship And a well-spoken fellow was he *text missing* And this night she'll be looking for me.	6. Three times roon went oor gallant ship And three times roon went she Three times roon went the bold Mary Ann And she sank to the bottom of the sea.

Table 1 contains six stanzas, which are set to a strophic melody. The first stanza describes the sighting of the Mermaid. This sets the scene for three different speakers, the captain, cabin boy, and cook, to lament their inevitable demise in a coming storm. Each speaker refers to what he is most sorry to leave behind: a wife, in the case of the captain; a woman for the cabin boy (while text is missing in the third stanza, it references a female in the last line. The cook's comment of "your wives" further solidifies the notion); and pots and pans for the cook. The latter adds a touch of humor to an otherwise solemn tale.

Astute observers may notice that while only two men other than the cook speak, the cook refers to "your wives all three," suggesting that he is speaking to the captain, cabin boy, and an

additional sailor. The researcher has deduced two possible explanations for this missing individual. One explanation is that perhaps a verse was lost in the process of transmission. Another holds that the additional sailor could be the narrator, who speaks in first person during the first and last verses and refers to himself and the rest of the crew collectively. Perhaps both explanations are true.

Rusby's text bears a clear likeness to that collected by Greig and Duncan, but it also introduces many unique features to an old song.

Table 4: Rusby Text	
Verse 1	Farewell the rolling hills, and farewell to the fields, Farewell, love, my fate tonight is sealed. On the sea, love, on the sea! High are the daunting winds, and bold the wind it blows, And I can see, love, the Mermaid and she knows. On the sea, love, on the sea!
Refrain	And peace as the sea, it comes, And peace, now, in her arms, Where I'll be, love, Sleeping in the sea!
Verse 2	My father built a bonnie ship and he set her on the sea. It was his joy, love, he gave that ship to me. On the sea, love, on the sea! On oceans high and oceans low, we sailed that ship around, We owned the tide, love, for glory we were bound. On the sea, love, on the sea!
Refrain	And peace as the sea, it comes, And peace, now, in her arms, Where I'll be, love, Sleeping in the sea!
Altered Refrain/Bridge	And three times, the ship went round, and three times round went she, It's murky deep, love, and far away from thee, On the sea, love, on the sea!
Partial Repeat of Verse 1	Farewell, the rolling hills and farewell to the field, Farewell, love, my fate tonight is sealed. On the sea, love, on the sea!

Refrain (with tag)	And peace, now, the sea it comes, And peace, now, in her arms, Where I'll be love, Sleeping in the sea! It's where I'll be, love, sleeping in the sea!

Unlike the Greig-Duncan text, the Rusby text is written in verse-chorus form, featuring two full verses and half of the first verse repeated, three choruses, and a bridge or altered chorus. While Version A describes the sighting of the mermaid, Rusby's text opens after the mermaid has been seen. Only one sailor speaks, so listeners learn significantly more about Rusby's narrator than about any of the Version A sailors. Between this factor and the use of first-person narration throughout the entire text, Rusby's version establishes a more personal relationship between the narrator and the listener. In this soliloquy, Rusby's narrator bids farewell to his lover. Not only does he speak of losing a loved one, he also says goodbye to his home with its rolling hills and fields. The narrator also reflects on a love of sailing shared with his father, who gave the narrator the beloved ship on which he is traveling. He describes himself and his father as having "owned the tide," reminding listeners of another imminent loss – the sailor's glory.

Rusby's text also brings a sense of peace for the narrator through the chorus. The lines "And peace, now, the sea it comes, and peace, now, in her arms" create the sense that Rusby's sailor has accepted his fate with a sense of calm not embraced by the Version A sailors. Rather than describing a painful or horrifying death by drowning, Rusby's sailor imagines himself as "sleeping in the sea." Still, the sailors from both texts seem to have accepted their fates with a certainty of the tragedy to come.

One unmistakable similarity between the two texts is found in the final verse of Version A and the bridge section of Rusby's recording. The lines "Three times round went the gallant ship and three times round went she" are identical to the first two lines of Version A's final

stanza, save the lack of Scots dialect. However, while Version A completes the stanza by marking the sinking of the ship, Rusby's text instead describes the conditions on the ocean floor, romanticizing his coming death. This brings listeners once more into the intimate experience of the sailor.

The melodies of the two versions vary drastically, beginning with Version A's strophic form and the Rusby text's verse-chorus form. They share a common meter but feature different modes. Below is the melody of Version A. Though it takes a few bars to establish the tonic, the melody can be described most accurately as falling within the Ionian mode (major scale) on D.

Example 3:

The Mermaid

Trans. by Greig and Duncan

The wind was still and the moon was_ clear, and we were in sight of the land, and_

5 there we__ spied_ a__ pret - ty_mer - maid with the comb and the glass_ in her

8 hand,herhand, her hand and a comb_ and the glass_ in her hand.

Sections of the Version A melody feature dotted and syncopated rhythms. While it captures the atmosphere of the text exceptionally, the Rusby melody is largely unlike Version A.

Example 4:

Kate Rusby's "The Mermaid"

By D. O'Cane and K. Rusby
Trans. by Olivia Phillips

Fare-well the rol - ling hills and fare-well to the fields,__ fare-well__ love, my
6 fate to-night is sealed.__ On the sea,__ love,__ On the sea!__
12 High are_ the daun - ting waves, and bold the wind it__ blows, and I can
17 see, love, the mer-maid and she knows,__ on the sea,__ love,__
22 on the sea!____ peace, now, the sea it comes, and peace, now,
27 in her arms, where I'll__ be, love, slee-ping in__ the sea!

Though also in simple quadruple meter, Rusby's "The Mermaid" matches most closely to the Dorian mode. The Rusby arrangement brings the older melody's use of dotted rhythms to a new height, tying notes across most measures. Between its mode and its tied notes, the melody captures both the mystery of the story and the constant rolling of the ocean. The rising and falling contour of the melodic line, as in mm. 1-7, also mimics the swelling and settling of waves. These features combine to capture the dreamy twilight of someone who has peacefully accepted the near arrival of death.

Rusby's arrangement, while holding true to the story of The Mermaid, paints an old black and white ballad with vibrant color. It bridges past and present perceptions of mermaids, drawing on the older trope of the mermaid as a harbinger while capturing the romance associated with mer people today. "The Mermaid" illustrates the afore-mentioned banjo player Ron Block's notion of tradition as a wide and flowing river of ideas old and new, and his view of Rusby as a tradition keeper and innovator. With their adaptation of "The Mermaid," Rusby and collaborator Damien O'Kane have proven themselves worthy of such praise.

Casey and Andersson

As the lead singer of the Irish-American band Solas, Karan Casey released "The Grey Selchie" on Solas' 1998 album *The Words That Remain*. Using a melody written by James Waters (the same used by Joan Baez in 1961), a traditional text, and an arrangement created in collaboration with Michael Aharon, the band put its own mark on an "old Scottish Child Ballad," according to the album's liner notes.[109] "The Grey Selchie"'s release marked the 60th anniversary of the transcription which Otto Andersson took from John Sinclair of Flotta, Orkney in 1938. Andersson was the first known person to transcribe the melody, which was titled as "The Grey Selchie of Sule Skerry."[110]

The Solas text seems to have been taken from the Andersson text, including its abbreviated title. However, Casey and Solas have modified the Scots dialect and condensed the text. Still, both texts tell the same story. The liner notes of *The Words That Remain* reveal that Casey first learned "The Grey Selchie" from the singing of Jean Redpath.[111] It is worth nothing

[109] Solas, *Words*, Liner notes.
[110] Thomson, 248.
[111] Solas, *Words*, Liner notes.

that Redpath's 1975 recording uses the same melody collected by Andersson in 1938, and it employs the same verses, save a differing ninth verse and a few modified phrasings.[112] Table 5 gives the Andersson text:

Table 5: Andersson Text	
1. In Norway land there lived a maid, "Hush bee loo lillie" this maid began; "I know not where my baby's father is, Whether by land or sea he does travel in."	8. "Thoo wilt nurse my little wee son For seven long years upo' thy knee, An' at the end o' seven long years I'll come back and pay the norish fee."
2. It happened on a certain day When this fair lady fell fast asleep, That in cam' a good greay selchie And set him down at her bed feet,	9. Now he had ta'en a purse of guld And he has put it upon her knee, Saying, "Gi'e to me my little young son, And take thee up they norrice fee."
3. Sayin' "Awak, awak, my pretty maid, For oh, how sound as thou dost sleep! An' I'll tell thee where thy baby's father is He's sittin' close at thy bed feet!"	10. She says, "My dear, I'll wed thee wi' a ring, Wi' a ring, my dear, I'll wed wi' thee!" "Thoo may go wed thee's weddens wi' whom thoo wilt, For I'm sure thoo'll never wed none wi' me!
4. "I pray, come tell to me thy name, Oh tell me where does thy dwelling be?" "My name is good Hein Mailer An' I earn my livin' oot o' the sea.	11. "But I'll put a gold chain around his neck An' a gey good gold chain it'll be, That if ever he comes to the Norway lands Thoo may have a gey good guess on he,
5. "I am a man upo' the land, I am a selchie in the sea, And when I'm far frae every strand My dwellin' is in Sule Skerrie."	12. "An' thoo will get a gunner good, An' a gey good gunner it will be, An' he'll gae oot on a May mornin' An' shoot the son an' the grey selchie."
6. "Alas, alas, this woeful fate! – This weary fate that's been laid for me, That a man should come from the Wast o' Hoy To the Norway lands to have a bairn wi' me!"	13. Oh, she has got a gunner good, An' a gey good gunner it was he, An' he went out on a May mornin' An' he shot the son and the grey selchie.
7. "My dear, I'll wed thee with a ring, With a ring, my dear, I'll wed with thee." "Thoo may go wed thee weddens wi' whom thoo wilt, For I'm sure thoo'll never wed none wi' me!"	14. "Alas, alas this woeful fate This weary fate that's been laid for me." And once or twice she sobbed and sighed, An' her tender heart did brak' in three.

[112] Redpath, "Grey Silkie."

The text collected by Andersson contains fourteen verses. The first line establishes the setting as Norway. In verse four, the Andersson text gives a name for the Grey Selchie, which the Solas text does not provide.

Casey's version omits seven of Andersson's verses, skipping or condensing verses 2-4. Also omitted are the verses referencing a marriage proposal from either the Selchie or the Maid, and any reference to the gold chain around the neck of the selchie child. These omissions are a way in which "The Grey Selchie" modernizes the traditional song. The Solas text has abbreviated the ballad to include only those verses needed to maintain the integrity of the tale. Some traces of the Scots dialect remain, but Solas has largely standardized the text.

Table 6: Casey Text	
1. In Norwa there sits a maid, "Byloo, my baby," she begins, "Little know I my child's father, Or if land or sea he's living in."	5. "It shall come to pass on a summer's day When the sun shines hot on every stone That I shall take my little wee son And teach him for to swim in the foam.
2. And then arose at her bed feet, A grumbly guest, I'm sure it was he! Saying, "Here am I, thy child's father, Although that I am not comely.	6. "You will marry a gunner good, And a proud good gunner I'm sure he will be, But he'll go out on a May morning And kill both my wee son and me."
3. "I am a man upon the land, I am a silkie in the sea And when I'm in my own country, My dwelling is in Sule Skerry."	7. Lo, she did marry a gunner good, And a proud good gunner I'm sure it was he, The very first shot that he did shoot, He killed the son and the Grey Silkie.
4. Then he had taken a purse of gold And he had put it upon her knee, Saying, "Give to me my little wee son And take thee up my nurse's fee.	8. In Norwa there sits a maid, "Byloo, my baby," she begins, "Little know I my child's father, Or if land or sea he's living in."

Casey's repetition of the first verse at the end of the ballad creates a sense of nostalgia, as if perhaps the maid is reliving her experience repeatedly through memory.

The melodies of the two versions vary significantly, though both are strophic settings of the text. Andersson's transcription is in a major key and features a time signature so irregular that it could only be created through the organic process of oral transmission. Changing with nearly every new measure, the irregular meter seems to lack even a pattern for its changes.

Example 5:

The Grey Selchie of Sule Skerry

Trans. by Otto Andersson

I am a man u - pon the land. I am a Sel-chie in the sea. And

6

when I'm far from eve-ry strand, my_ dwel-ling is in Sol-sker-rie.

Unlike the Fowlis recording, the Solas recording does not use the same melody as the source material, and unlike Rusby's recording, it does not use an original melody, instead borrowing the mixolydian melody of Waters. It remains in simple quadruple meter throughout, though notes tied over bar lines provide flexibility through an obscured downbeat. Perhaps these ties are meant to help capture the irregularity of the original Andersson transcription. Fans of the 1961 Baez recording may notice a difference in the meter of Solas's recording. While the researcher has been unable to trace the original Waters notation to determine its meter, Baez recorded her "Silkie" in simple triple meter. This accounts for the most obvious difference between "Silkie" and Solas's "The Grey Selchie." The first verse of the ballad, transcribed in Example 5, is the least ornamented of the verses.

Example 6:

The Grey Selchie

Arr. Solas

Trans. Olivia Phillips

In Nor - way there lives a maid. "Bai- loo my ba - by," she be-

7

gins, "Lit - tle know I my child's fa - ther

11

nor land or sea he's dwel-ling in."

Summary and Discussion

The following section will review and summarize the methods, analysis, and findings of this study.

Reviewing the Research Question

Mermaids and selkies, marine human-seal hybrids, have a long and romantic history of representation in the folklore of coastal and island regions in Ireland and Scotland. From malicious fin folk to benevolent mermaids, from a seal that nursed a human child to the selkie lover of an unfaithful wife, these aquatic creatures have captured imaginations for centuries. This otherworldly fascination has also manifested in song.

While some ballads based on mermaid and selkie lore have been extensively studied, these studies have not compared such ballads to each other or to recordings of the same ballads from the past 25 years. To fill this research gap, this study compares contemporary recordings of selkie and mermaid songs by Julie Fowlis, Kate Rusby, and Karan Casey (with Solas) to the earliest transcriptions of the traditional ballads and songs on which they were based. The study examines the ways in which these singers have maintained the songs' traditional melodies and

texts and innovatively adapted earlier representations. Examined recordings are Fowlis's "Òran an Ròin," Rusby's "The Mermaid," and Solas's "The Grey Selchie."

Review of Methodology

In this study, the texts and melodies of each contemporary version were compared to the oldest traceable versions of the corresponding traditional ballads. Texts were examined for similarities and differences of language, such as the Scots dialect versus contemporary English, and of the stories they tell. Melodies were notated in the Sibelius software program and analyzed to determine modes, scales, rhythm, and other melodic features of each. The analyses were compared to consider similarities and differences between the source versions and contemporary recordings.

Summary of Results

The results of the study were mostly as expected, including the degree to which each contemporary artist strayed from the selected source transcription of the traditional song she recorded. Of the three artists, Fowlis, whose career reflects a devotion to the Gaelic language tradition, has created a recording most closely aligned with the source version. Rusby, who is known for her fresh artistic contributions to the folk style, had recorded the most innovative arrangement. Casey's recording falls somewhere between Fowlis's and Rusby's on this scale of evolving tradition, drawing on a contemporary melody but incorporating a text closely related to the source version.

"Òran an Ròin" matches a melody performed by William Matheson, though it is not the Matheson melody given directly to David Thomson, which was examined in this study. The melody included in Thomson's *People of the Sea* is in the dorian mode, while Fowlis's is in

harmonic minor, an alteration of the aeolian (minor) mode. Aside from a few different spellings and missing accent marks in the Thomson transcription, the texts are identical.

Meanwhile, the Rusby's melody for "The Mermaid" is an original composed by Rusby and Damien O'Kane. The Greig-Duncan melody of "The Mermaid" follows the major scale, but Rusby's "The Mermaid" is written in the dorian mode. Rusby's text, like the melody, is a reimagining of the traditional version. It deals with the same themes as its older counterpart, but the language of the Rusby text is modernized. Rusby also spends more time developing the character of a single speaker, whereas the older text has four. This gives the story in Rusby's version an additional sense of humanity as listeners come to know more about the speaker and his past.

"The Grey Selchie," finally, is neither entirely original nor based completely on the Andersson transcription. Karan Casey first heard the song from Jean Redpath, who used most of the same verses as Casey (with some modified phrasings) but maintained Andersson's melody. Casey and Solas chose instead to use the mixolydian melody of James Waters. Meter is one stark difference between the melody notated by Andersson in 1938 and that recorded by Solas sixty years later. The Andersson transcription, a reflection of oral transmission and the natural irregularities created through such a process, changes meter nearly every measure. The Solas melody remains comfortably in simple quadruple meter, though frequent ties across bar lines may have been used to mimic the free rhythmic flow of the older melody. Casey's seven verses correspond to half of Andersson's fourteen verses, despite some modernization of the text. Only those verses essential to understanding the plot of the tale are kept.

Discussion of Results

The results of this study reveal diversity in the ways that contemporary female vocalists in Celtic music interact with traditional song. Some artists, like Fowlis, keep them as close to their original form as possible. Others, like Rusby, may reimagine traditional songs altogether, creating modernized melodies and texts inspired by older forms of the same song. There are also artists, like Casey, who choose to incorporate features from the oldest traditions while finding inspiration in more recent recordings.

It is notable that while Greig and Duncan's "The Mermaid" and Andersson's "The Great Silkie" are both in major keys, their contemporary versions adopt less typical modes or scales. Rusby uses the dorian mode and Casey's melody, borrowed from James Waters, uses the mixolydian scale. These ventures away from the major scale emphasize the dreamy quality of the otherworld, in which mermaids and selkies exist. Perhaps these contemporary vocalists and composers feel the need to reflect the romance of selkies and mermaids melodically, while singers of early versions of the same songs may not have considered such tales to be so unusual in a time when such superstitions were a routine feature of coastal and island communities. Therefore, the major scale may have seemed a suitable fit.

Regardless of the ways they have chosen to interpret the songs, Fowlis, Rusby, Casey, and their work are a testament to the continued celebration of Scottish and Irish folklore and to the undying appeal of selkies and mermaids. The creatures' roles have changed and evolved with time. Seal hunting, no longer the necessity that it once seemed, has been completely illegal in Scotland since June of 2020,[113] and sailing the seven seas is no longer a likely job prospect for

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[113] Humane Society International / United Kingdom.

young people, erasing nautical superstitions about mermaids and the types of misfortune they may bring. Yet these creatures continue to capture the modern imagination, and now that the stakes are lowered – no livelihoods are threatened by superstitions of selkies or mermaids – these creatures have become beautiful, fascinating novelties. Their continued presence in popular culture helps us to appreciate the roles they once played in Scottish and Irish folklife, and what those roles revealed about the people who believed in them. Artists such as Fowlis, Rusby, and Casey help remind contemporary listeners of the roots of these myths through their adaptations of earlier material, using fresh melodic or textual takes to bridge the serious mermaid and selkie figures of the past to the whimsical, romanticized versions of the present.

Through the recordings examined in this study, the work of Julie Fowlis, Kate Rusby, and Karen Casey corroborate a statement by Henry Glassie that was discussed in the introduction of this study: that "tradition is the opposite of only one kind of change: that in which disruption is so complete that the new cannot be read as an innovative adaptation of the old."[114] While the recordings of the three vocalists bear varying degrees of semblance to their source versions, they are undeniably a part of this ever-evolving process of honoring, maintaining, creating, and recreating tradition. It is perhaps thanks to artists like these that some of the traditions of yesterday have become the traditions of today—and may live on as the traditions of tomorrow.

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[114]Glassie, "Tradition," 395.

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