

THE CLUB SONG AND RELATED MATTERS

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At the Club Dinner in November 1926, the Chairman (nowadays the President) referred to the “*club poetess, Miss Skakle*”, being “*not yet ... inspired*”, but the Club Song “*Where the High-Road Ends*” was sung in public for the first time at the following year’s Dinner. A supplement to the *Cairngorm Club Journal (CCJ)* Vol. XI (no. 66) (January 1928) contained its words, by Miss Mary Agnes Skakle, and its music, composed by her sister Miss Margaret Skakle. Both these ladies joined the Club in 1920, Margaret serving on the Committee in 1934-36. The Song seems to have been sung at all the pre-war Club Dinners, sometimes as part of a “musical programme”, led by the composer’s brother, Mr George Skakle (not a Club member).

Margaret Skakle died in January 1939, a ¾-page obituary on page 62 of *CCJ* Vol. XV (80) (1939) recording her enthusiasm for mountain nature and walking and noting that she made several contributions to the *Journal*. One of these – “*A Spring Traverse of Lochnagar*”, in *CCJ* Vol. XIII (74), uses several musical analogies, such as pilgrims in Tannhauser ascending to the Foxes’ Well, and the corrie itself as an appropriate setting for Brunhilde.

Mary Agnes Skakle, who died around 1960 (see *CCJ* no. 92), composed at least one poem for the *Journal*. One, in *CCJ* XI (62) (1924), is a long (350 lines) “*Souvenir of a walk through the Larig Ghru from Aviemore to Braemar, September 1923*”, written in the Doric. Another, in *CCJ* XII (67), 1929, is “*The Pilgrim of the Hills*”, whose chorus goes:

*On the steep Cairngorms, where we wander all together,
There’s a something you never find below;
And it’s calling you and me o’er the bracken and the heather,
Where the eagle and the ptarmigan go.*

According to a descendent, Professor Jan Skakle of Aberdeen University, recently Head of the School of Natural and Computing Sciences, and holder of a Personal Chair in Physics (email 3 February 2013):

“Margaret was, I think, my father's aunt; George was his father, there were (I think) two other sisters [one presumably Mary] who survived till perhaps the 60's and a brother Hugh who is commemorated in Kings Chapel and St Machar's Cathedral as he died in the Great War. I believe Margaret, or one of her sisters, may have been a music teacher in the school that became Hazlehead [i.e. the Central School and later Aberdeen Academy, opposite the Art Gallery]. I know they were all very musical and all keen hillwalkers as there are albums of photos of them out on the hills.”

There seem to be no other "Club Songs"¹ but clearly there was a good deal of singing at Club Dinners in pre-war days (despite long speeches, many faithfully recorded in print). At the 1925 Club Dinner, James A. Parker (President 1927-30, bridge and indicator builder, guidebook author, and Munroist), in giving the toast to “The Guests”, suggested that *“there might be adopted as the refrain of a club song these lines (with apologies to Longfellow²): “*

*Leave no litter lying on the hills;
For empty tins and tangled strings
And paper bags are not the things
To scatter where the bunting sings*

Of course, other clubs have their songs; the SMC was early in the field, when its first Journal Editor, J. G. Stott, composed for the 1892 New Year Meet four verses (later supplemented by three more, sent from New Zealand) with the chorus³:

¹ Except perhaps *The Cairngorm Club Meet's Circular Calypso*, composed by Tom Patey (see his *One Man's Mountains*, Gollancz, 1978), which uses the wording of the Club's “motor coach excursion” circular (presumably around 1955), such as “Members are requested not to ring the Meets Secretary at his residence”). Patey says (p. 72) that “*the song enjoyed a fair measure of popularity amongst the nonconformists*”, i.e. the Etchachan Club. If space allows [it doesn't: Ed], the wording, with permission, is appended to this article. Patey has several other similar songs to his credit: see sixteen of these in *One Man's Mountains*.

² The reference has not been traced.

³ Parodied Teutonically by Tom Patey in *Ach, Mein Grossen Boten!*.

*Oh, my big hobnailers! Oh, my big hobnailers!
 How they speak of mountain peak,
 And lengthy stride o'er moorland wide!
 Oh, my big hobnailers! Oh, my big hobnailers!
 Memories raise of joyous days
 Upon the mountain side!*

The *SMC Journal* also features the songs of several other clubs, including the Gaiter Club⁴, and the Yorkshire Ramblers, who seem to have several songs to their credit.

The Cairngorm Club Library contains a small book, *The Songs of the Mountaineers*, compiled in 1922 by John Hirst B.A. Cantab, M.I.E.E. for the Rucksack Club. It contains the words, but not the music⁵, of about 110 songs, 67 of them classified as songs of general interest, and 43 as “club songs and personal ditties”. Most referred to the Lake District or Yorkshire, but several are from Scotland, including *Citronella: a memory of Skye, August 1918* (commemorating midges!), *A Search Party, How to Become an Editor* (by Hirst himself), and *The Revolt of Women*. Half-a-dozen were taken from the *SMC Journal*, including:

*Och! the Coolin, that'll stand no foolin'
 The rocks at the bottom are terrible hard
 The summit's fine and airy, and the slopes contrary
 Exhaust the vocabulary of an Irish bard.*

A later book - also in the Club's Library and published about 1937 to raise funds for mountain rescue - is *Songs for Climbers*, by Ben Humble⁶ and W. M. M'Lellan.

These days, amongst the older generation at least, mountaineering often goes with love of music. Several current Club members are also

⁴ An aristocratic walking club founded in 1849 by John Burns, the first Lord Inverclyde, and with Lord Palmerston as a member. It was moribund by 1911 but donated £100 towards the SMC's first mountaineering guide.

⁵ Despite the fact that “*our contributors demanded music, our members demanded music, and the songs themselves arose before us and protested at being sent forth naked, stripped of their proper clothing*”.

⁶ A well-known Scottish mountaineer, who initiated the country's mountain rescue system, and became a dentist despite total deafness.

members of the Aberdeen Chamber Music Society, and/or are frequently seen at Music Hall concerts. Still, the genre may be worth exploring further, without descending to "*The Sound of Music*": a high-class travel agency offers a "*Schubertiade with Hill Walking*"!

The Cairngorm Club Song

Where the High-Road Ends (circa 1927)

by Miss Mary Skakle; set to music by Miss Margaret Skakle.

Oh! Some for recreation cross the Channel like a fish
 To fly the broad Atlantic is another's dearest wish
 The road-hog takes his pleasure with a cloud of dust behind
 But give me the locomotion of the good old-fashioned kind

Chorus

Tramping o'er the heather, that's the sport for me
 Where the track winds upwards by the boulder and the scree
 Then come my brave hobnailers, you're the surest friends
 When we've got to take Shank's Naggie, where the High Road ends.

The secrets of the mountains are for those upon the hike
 Though some can climb Ben Nevis on a screechy motorbike
 They'd rush the gates of Heaven just to shock the angels there
 But I'll stick to golden slippers when I climb the Golden Stair

Chorus: Tramping o'er the heather, ...

Though once upon the fam'ly tree they say we used to leap
 We've left our tails behind us like the fabled nursery sheep
 But soon when all are flying and dependent on the hub
 There'll still be Johnny Walker and the Cairngorm Club

Chorus: Tramping o'er the heather, ...

O hills of Caledonia may you be forever free
From fiendish record-breakers as they scorch from sea to sea
When roadways twine among you and invade your calm retreat
Still keep a patch o' moorland for those ancient things called feet.

Chorus: Tramping o'er the heather, ...

The Cairngorm Club