

A Highland Gentleman: The Roshven Fiddler Farquhar MacRae

By Shona McMillan

Google “Farquhar MacRae” and little information will be found pertaining to this fiddle and box player from Roshven. Yet, in 2000, his funeral at Glenfinnan was one of the biggest ever seen as hundreds of people traveled from all over the Scottish Highlands and Islands to pay their respects to this most remarkable man. As a musician, he was not recognized as a prolific writer of tunes or as a formal teacher of students. Nevertheless, in Scotland’s traditional music scene, his name is synonymous with Highland music at its best. So, for this kindly, generous, fondly remembered man, it is fitting that his legacy is not to be found in the factual, emotionless listings of the Internet but rather in the living musical legacy which he gave so freely to others. From village hall dances to the largest of traditional music concerts around the world, the love and passion for music which he knew and instilled in the young is itself now being passed on for the benefit of subsequent generations. Many of today’s internationally acclaimed West Highland musicians recognize his influence in their most formative of musical years.

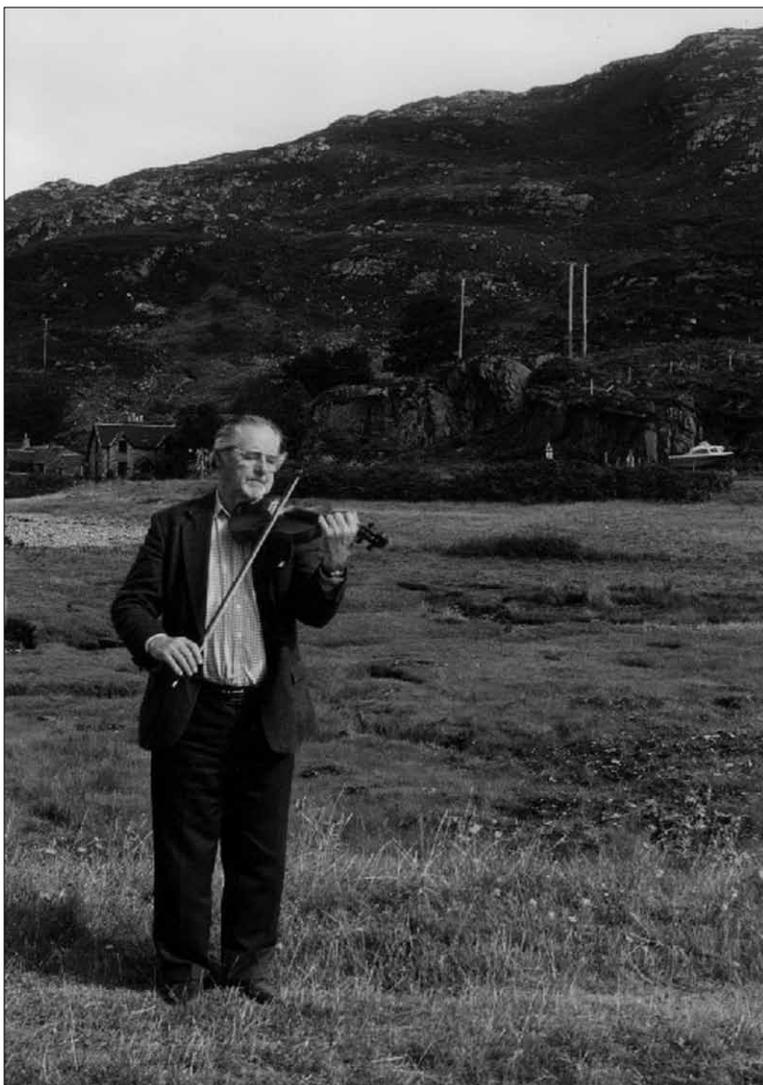
Iain MacDonald of Roshven Records relates, “Growing up in Glenuig, I knew Farquhar since childhood. He had a significant influence on my musical upbringing and was the first person I ever played with professionally... A quiet, gentle, self-effacing man, he would be surprised at the huge influence he has had on so many and the high regard in which he is still held today! He was a consummate musician and a consummate gentleman.”

As a boy who taught himself to play by ear in a remote part of the Highlands, Farquhar grew up to become a man internationally respected for his music. So, how does his story begin?

Not long after the turn of the last century, the MacRaes — Duncan MacRae from Faddoch, near Dornie in Kintail and his wife Mary, a game keeper’s daughter, from Crianlarich — moved to Roshven. Working in farming they set up home in Moidart and raised five children: Donald, Dougie, Katie, Farquhar, and Peggy.

Born in 1925, Farquhar’s early life was very different from life in Roshven today. Recalling this time, his sister Peggy MacRae, just a few years younger, speaks of their life in “another world.” “There was no electricity, no hot or cold running water, and to get to nearby villages, we had to walk four miles over the hills to Glenuig or take a boat for six miles to Lochailort. Not until 1967 did the road open.”

Peggy recalls three or four scattered houses in Roshven, all



Farquhar with the Glenuig schoolhouse in the background

occupied by people working the land. However, such a physically demanding lifestyle also had benefits. Living off the land gave people the deepest appreciation of their environment, its changing weather and seasons. Socially, there was a tremendous sense of community. When work was done, people enjoyed their time free from cell phones, email, Internet, and TV. For Farquhar, his time was all about the potential for music — to hear new tunes, and to learn and develop these into sets to play with others. Peggy remembers him as a young child, playing a small two-row piano accordion. There was music in the family on their mother’s side and a cousin in Inverness, Dougie MacDougal, was a particularly good box player. Yet from Roshven, Inverness was the other side of Scotland. Peggy suggests it is likely that the initial musical interest sparked in her brothers was from a local musical family, the MacKenzies.

Peggy’s memories are of Farquhar already playing his accordion when his mother decided his brothers Dougie and Donald could start on the fiddle with local piper and fiddler Allan MacKenzie. When the fiddle was obtained, all the brothers and Peggy wanted to play, so it was shared. Asking how this worked, Peggy remarked that Farquhar was always so good-natured, she never remembered any problems. He would wait patiently,

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seemingly, even in his early years — the gentle personality of the man was already within the boy. As was his passion for music, so by age ten, his musical ability was emerging through hours of playing and developing his own style. Looking back, Peggy reflects, “Farquhar lived for music!”

As the siblings grew, so too did their appetite for playing, and from this the Roshven Ceilidh Band was born. Considering the geographical challenge of their starting point, their motivation was impressive. To go to dances they had to walk for miles over the hills and, after playing, return again on foot. At local halls, the drums would be already set up for Peggy. Farquhar, with equal ability on accordion and fiddle, would play the button box while his brothers played the fiddle. Peggy and the three boys, with their musical instruments strapped to their backs, would hike back and forth to the different venues. In time, Farquhar also picked up the pipes and could “knock out a tune” on the piano. Music from such a talented family made for an entertaining if unpredictable event. Crossing the hills in rain, sleet, snow, and gales would play havoc with their time-keeping but dancers would patiently await their arrival. If a late start happened it was only likely to result in a later finish, perhaps at three or even four o'clock in the morning.

As another young person growing up in Moidart, Fergie MacDonald would enthusiastically attend these dances. Today, he recounts many humorous stories from this time. In one, Fergie remembers watching the MacRaes leading a hall packed with dancers as water dripped around the musicians' feet, their clothes soaked by an earlier downpour.

Within this community, Farquhar's musical ability flourished. The creative strengths he gained from others he contributed back through his playing. As a young adult, Farquhar was a great inspiration and encouragement to those around him. For example, Fergie MacDonald was about nine or ten when he first heard Farquhar play the box and states, “Farquhar was the one who gave me the music bug.” From about age twelve, Fergie would go to dances, sit beside the stage and “soak up Farquhar's every intonation and interpretation.” Over time, Fergie would be passed the box, given wee shots, and encouraged to play. As Fergie's ability grew, professional bookings were undertaken and thus began a musical relationship which would span nearly half a century. They performed at special gigs abroad and all over Scotland, at every fiddle and box club. Fergie fondly remembers these days, and the conversations they shared in the car after each gig. At the start of each journey, Farquhar would settle himself in his seat, ready to enjoy a wee smoke on his pipe and begin the countless stories they would share, so that the long journeys were as enjoyable a passage of time as the gigs had been. Fergie later composed “The Roshven Fiddler” for Farquhar.

Fergie explains that Farquhar could convey to those around him his personal love for the culture, Highland music, songs, and tradition. “On the violin, Farquhar had an almost magical way of playing and reaching his audience — his playing would stir the soul. One of the greatest Northwest fiddle players I have known, a unique player and absolute Highland gentleman. Farquhar should be recognized posthumously for the contribution he has made throughout his life to Scotland's traditional music.”

By prior appointment with the School of Scottish Studies, recordings of Farquhar playing and speaking can be heard. His closest friends say at times before playing, Farquhar could feel shy even speaking. In the spoken part of these recordings, perhaps he sounds a little embarrassed by the scrutiny of his playing. He is asked whether, if his playing were transcribed, another could reproduce it. Quietly you hear him answer, he believes not. In learning to play by ear, Farquhar was never constrained to just read and reproduce music. He mastered a freedom of expression in his playing, where he let his emotions flow through.

As he grew up and traveled, Farquhar's style developed beyond his original geographical roots. He was very open-minded about learning from those he met. He was on a musical journey and learned through trial, error, and experimentation. One particular meeting during the war was indicative of his open approach to



learning. American troops were stationed in that area of Moidart, and one, Bill Arimond, was a classical concert violinist. The two became close friends and Farquhar welcomed Bill's guidance, which helped him to improve his holding of the fiddle.

Farquhar was known for playing reels with a gentle, fluid grip on the bow, and jigs with graceful speed and precision. He was associated with tunes such as "Mrs. MacPherson of Inveran" and "Donald MacLean's Jig" and, unusual for a traditional player,



The Roshven Ceilidh Band — the first traditional Highland band to play Edinburgh Festival. Donald MacRae, top left; Dougie MacRae, bottom left; Farquhar, second from right, bottom row.



Farquhar standing on the left; Fergie MacDonald, second from right.



L-R: Charlie MacFarlane, Farquhar, Harvey Kruger, and Angus Grant.

he also learned to play in different positions. Iain MacFarlane of Blazin Fiddles relates, "Farquhar was my next door neighbor for many years, a great example of a 'Highland Gentleman,' who lived for his music. I will always enjoy the special memories I have of his tremendous ability on the fiddle, so apparent when he would play tunes like the 'Mason's Apron' with all its variation in first, second, and third positions."

Years after the war, walking along a Fort William street with another musician, Farquhar engaged in conversation with an American who turned out to be from the same place as Bill Arimond. Returning to America, the person contacted all the Arimonds in the phone book and so, for a second time, fate intervened to unite the two friends and for years they wrote to each other before meeting again in the Highlands.

In the locality of Moidart, there were many fine musicians who influenced Farquhar's music and, at thirty-one, it was an eye opener for him when he met left-handed fiddler Angus Grant. Brought together through their work on Inverailort estate, Farquhar confided his surprise when he learned that Angus had adapted his fiddle for left-handed playing. Farquhar explained that he was totally left-handed and had struggled to play in a right-handed fashion.

With local piper and fiddler Charlie MacFarlane of Glenfinnan, the three friends traveled all over the area and beyond. Affectionately, Angus recounts some tales of Farquhar's infamous time-keeping — or lack thereof! It appeared that nothing would particularly generate in Farquhar a desire to hurry and so he was often late. Angus tells the story of one particularly high-profile event, a St. Andrew's Night Ball in Paris when, by all accounts, the personal stress level of Angus was certainly growing. The guests had arrived, piper John McCallum was playing in the foyer, and everyone was waiting to begin when Farquhar wandered in smiling broadly. Carrying his box, he was not in the least perturbed that he was late, and indeed, he was in most convivial form. Arriving an hour previously, he had encountered a man who had been shooting in Moidart, so the two had gone to share their stories and enjoy a dram. Hearing Angus, you can relate to his frustration but he tells the story at his own expense, evident of his high regard for his friend.

Never seeing the need to hurry — perhaps that's why Farquhar was forty-four when he married. His wife Hettie was a local lass who had first met Farquhar when she was nine. The couple continued to live in the area and had three children: Farquhar Junior, Helen, and Alasdair. Farquhar and his brother Dougie farmed together for awhile, and later Hettie and Farquhar took over the running of the Ardgour hotel.

Iain MacMaster, a lifelong friend, recalls Farquhar's great success at the Glenfinnan Games. A natural-born runner, Farquhar excelled at sport and won many prizes year after year.

Similarly in music, he enjoyed the opportunities which playing awarded him. At home he was delighted to meet visiting musicians such as Alasdair Fraser and Buddy MacMaster and through invitations abroad he enjoyed meeting the people and musicians there. As a fiddle competition judge, Farquhar was especially proud to be invited to the Highland Games at Grandfather



Front: Farquhar's friend classical violinist Bill Arimond from Minnesota and Farquhar. Center: Farquhar's wife Hettie, next to a member of Bill's family. Back: Farquhar MacRae Junior and Bill Arimond's son.

Mountain in North Carolina. There was also a side to him which could take great delight in achieving the unexpected. Whilst attending the Grandfather Mountain games, he entered a Jew's harp competition and surprised everyone when he won!

Throughout his life, Farquhar worked hard at what he did and had many plans for retirement, including the making of a CD. Yet suddenly, at one very typical gig, everything was to change. During the last waltz, playing next to Farquhar on stage, Angus Grant and the rest of the band became aware that something was changing in Farquhar's playing. The tune finished, the audience not even knowing that anything was wrong, and an ambulance was called and Farquhar was rushed to the hospital. Just into his seventies, tragically, Farquhar had suffered a stroke and would never be able to play music again.

After the terrible shock, the immediate community rallied round, the young playing many benefit gigs and ceilidhs to raise a tremendous financial contribution which went towards a vehicle for Farquhar to get around in. In the years which followed, Hettie took Farquhar in his wheelchair all over the area to various gatherings and musical events so he could get out and be with his friends. Not embittered by the loss of his music, Farquhar displayed characteristic strength and dignity and continued to enjoy the tunes, companionship, and *craic* of the younger players.

Angus Grant describes the day he last saw Farquhar, on the field at Glenfinnan Games. Surrounding Farquhar in his wheelchair was a small crowd of people, many young, all laughing and talking with him, pleased that he was there. Sadly, just a few days later, Farquhar died of a heart attack.

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Farquhar at the bar of the Glenfinnan House Hotel.
Photo by Jean Campbell, who visited each year from America.

Reports estimate that as many as 800 may have attended his funeral. Tourists must surely have thought that some great Highland Chief had died when Farquhar's coffin was finally taken to Glenfinnan Games Field, the scene of so many earlier happy events and sporting achievements. Angus Grant recalls, "On the shoulders of the young bloods his coffin was carried for one last time in a lap of honour around the Games Field. Then a sporting cup, bearing his name, was filled with whisky and passed round the coffin bearers to take a drink to his name."

In August 2000, Farquhar was laid to rest in the small graveyard in Glenfinnan on the shores of Loch Shiel. The musical gathering which followed his passing continued for days and, appropriately, celebrated the life of this remarkable Highland gentleman, Farquhar MacRae, the Fiddler from Roshven.

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The Roshven Fiddler

Strathspey by Fergie MacDonald, © 1998, Rannoch Music. Used by permission.

"On visiting my dear friend Farquhar MacRae in the Belford Hospital, Fort William, this tune had to be for him. We traveled thousands of miles to 'Fiddle and Box' clubs all over Scotland, and played thousands of venues over a span of forty years. It was Farquhar MacRae who got me going on the 'box' when I was a teenager and together we produced a very Gaelic West Highland sound, especially when playing Gaelic waltzes. Farquhar had this 'thing,' which one either has or has not. Being a Gaelic speaker, Farquhar could express the Gaelic and the culture through his music. A credit to West Highland music, and I only hope that this tune doesn't fall short of the calibre of the person it is composed for." — Fergie MacDonald



Iain MacFarlane, Farquhar, and Allan Henderson in Ireland, 1995. "Farquhar was quite simply one of the finest Highland gentlemen you would ever wish to meet. I consider myself very fortunate to have known him. He influenced quietly, always encouraging, never criticizing, and remains one of that select band of individuals of whom you would never hear a bad word spoken."

— Allan Henderson, *Blazin Fiddles*

Farquhar & Hettie's Waltz

By Farquhar MacRae; transcribed by Angus Grant. © Harriet (Hettie) MacRae. Used by permission.
 This tune was composed by Farquhar for his wife Hettie. It was played at Farquhar's funeral mass in Glenfinnan in August, 2000, and has been recorded by Blazin Fiddles on their CD *Fire On* (www.blazin-fiddles.co.uk/).

[Shona McMillan is a fiddle-playing photo journalist and artist living in Edinburgh. Shona learned to play the fiddle by ear with Edinburgh's Shetland Fiddlers Association and players such as Aly Bain before receiving a scholarship from Alasdair Fraser to learn in America with Willie Hunter from Shetland and Buddy MacMaster from Cape Breton. In Canada she guested with the Waterboys before journeying to Ireland with Martin Hayes and continuing to learn from players John Sheahan of the Dubliners, Steve Wickham of the Waterboys and Gerry O'Connor of La Lugh. Shona can be reached at shonamcmillan@yahoo.com. For more information, please see her myspace page at www.myspace.com/delfiniproductions.]