

Button Boxes and Moothies: celebrating the free reed tradition in the North-east



Bothy crew from Balcairn. Photograph by permission of the Meldrum and Bourtie Heritage Society



Frances Wilkins

It's an exciting time at the University of Aberdeen's Elphinstone Institute. During 6-8 November this year, the fourth Button Boxes and Moothies festival will be hosted by the Institute, attracting musicians and enthusiasts from many parts of the UK, Ireland, and further afield. The unique event brings together instrumentalists who play mouth organs, concertinas, melodeons, Jew's harps (trumps), and diatonic button accordions. It will be the perfect place, on an otherwise cold winter weekend, to whet the appetite and open the ears to the music of some of

the very best talents from Ireland, England and Scotland. While many people may associate the North-east of Scotland with fiddle music and ballad singing, there has been much less awareness of the region's heritage of free reed instruments, and the number of players today is relatively few. But you don't have to go back far in history to see that button boxes, concertinas, moothies and Jew's harps have played a vital role in shaping the musical traditions of this area, both in the farming communities and among the seafaring population. For example, bothy crews of the late 19th and early 20th centuries often included melodeon players, and David Kerr Cameron, in his book *The Cornkister Days*, wrote of a time when "every child of the touns grew up with a melodeon and a mouth-organ and maybe a jew's harp in the house". In the accompanying photos, both of

which date from around 1900, melodeons are shown taking centre stage among bothy crews in Balcairn and Bethelnie. And melodeons weren't just tinkered with for fun. Cameron also notes that "Some [farm workers] made songs or melodies that would pass down for those who sought to know and understand their ways. Some managed to take their accordions and melodeons out of the bothy and on to the dance-hall dais." Most people in those days would learn such instruments by ear from relatives, and concertina player Peter Campbell, who came from Tomintoul, in rural Aberdeenshire, used to listen to his father play every night. By the time he was eight or nine, he was able to play the tunes without any instruction. Dance bands often featured free reed instruments rather than fiddles at that time, and Peter Campbell's family dance band, which played around the

Tomintoul area, consisted of five musicians, three of whom played the concertina. As with the fiddle, the concertina and melodeon were also popular among buskers and sailors, and in coastal communities free reed instruments were frequently seen and heard on the streets. One observer commented when writing about Dundee in 1894: "Concertinas and melodeons are as common as blackberries and the twilight hours are filled with their melody, poured forth by the enamoured youth at the stair-foot of his seniorita's seven-floor tenement." The instruments travelled by sea, as well, and there has been evidence gathered by Peter Cooke in the Shetland Islands that women working in the herring industry brought back concertinas (known as 'peerie accordions') on their return home from the East Coast fishing ports.

Button boxes and concertinas, moothies and Jew's harps also made their way on to whaling ships bound for the Arctic, in the late 19th century, where they were commonly played by Scottish sailors. This, along with the music introduced by American whalers, had a huge influence on the musical traditions of those dwelling in the Arctic, most notably the Inuit. Free reed instruments were introduced to the Inuit over many years by men working in both the whaling industry and the Hudson's Bay Company, used as trade goods and sold at Hudson's Bay Company posts. The whalers became known to the Inuit as the 'Arctic postmen', because they would bring a variety of goods with them, including musical instruments, each time they returned. A number of these whaling men were from North-east Scotland and the Northern Isles, having boarded the ships in Dundee, Peterhead, Stromness and Lerwick. From here, they were transported to the Arctic fringes where they often over-wintered, living and working together among the Inuit.

There are many stories of these initial musical exchanges between Scots and the Inuit. One account comes from someone aboard the Dundee whaling ship, *Esquimaux*, on her 1899 voyage through the Davis Straits to Greenland, where concertina and fiddle were brought out for an "impromptu celebration". The account relates: "[T]he crew were allowed to go onshore for a final dance. The crew returned

to the ship at 0pm, with all the fair sex of the settlement at their heels. Something went wrong with the condens[er on the ship], so a concertina and violin were speedily at work on the ice, and dancing in full swing." Dances were often held in cabins at the whaling stations or in igloos. Dorothy Eber, in her research on the impact of the whalers in the Eastern Arctic, quotes Mary Ipeelie, an Inuit woman from Iqaluit, who had many recollections of the whaling days.

She remembered one cabin at the whaling station in Mitsiga being filled with nearly 40 accordions that the Inuit had stored there for safety. She recalled: "We danced by the light of oil lanterns[...] there were so many accordions - some more elaborate than others - and the Inuit were so happy to dance. Everyone took turns playing, my mother included[...] We kept on dancing in those cabins for years. Every summer when we went caribou hunting we passed by the cabins and danced"



Bothy crew from Bethelnie. Photograph by permission of the Meldrum and Bourtie Heritage Society

Mr Stephen James Stewart, posted to Cape Dorset by the Hudson's Bay Company in the early 20th century, recalled of the Inuit there: "Always one or two of them had an accordion, handed down from family to family from the old whaling days, and there were always one or two pretty good players. And when they'd get together they'd have a dance with accordion. They'd play Scots tunes, of course." These instruments became known to the Inuit as 'the instrument that you stretch', and became incorporated fully into Inuit life, so that by the time the whalers had gone they were integral to the cultural expressions of the region. Today, button boxes and concertinas are deeply embedded into the musical lives of these Arctic inhabitants, with many people, including a number of women, showing considerable skill in playing the

instruments. It is no surprise, then, that many people in the Arctic consider the music of the accordion to be the real traditional music of the people there, it having somewhat eclipsed indigenous musical traditions in many parts. And, even though the Scottish whalers are no longer visible in the region, the music continues to hold great influence. The late Jimmy Shand, for example, has an impressive fan-base in the Arctic, perhaps because his music, like that of the Inuit, had roots in the dances and techniques learned by the Inuit from Peterhead and Dundee whalers in the 19th century. And there has been cultural exchange going the other way, too, with Inuit performers visiting Scotland. For example, in 2000, Michael Doig, deputy head of Peterhead Academy, helped to arrange a trip to North-east Scotland for a group of Inuit youths from the Attagoyuk School, in Pangnirtung, Arctic Canada. The reason for the visit was that exactly a century before, a group of Inuit fishermen had performed a national dance at Peterhead Harbour. On arrival in Peterhead, many local residents were amazed to see the young people dancing to an Inuit tune which had striking similarities to a Scottish reel.

While traditional and popular melodies were played in the aforementioned contexts, free reed instruments and, in particular, the concertina, were popular for playing sacred music. This was especially the case among members of evangelical denominations found in North-east Scottish coastal communities, particularly the Salvation Army, who started using concertinas in their bands in the 1880s. The photograph shows one such Salvation Army member: 'Blin Jimmy', from Buckie, pictured in the early 20th century, dressed in uniform and holding his concertina. Another concertina-playing Salvation Army member, Victor Smith, from Edinburgh, was 'Territorial Youth Campaigner'. He visited Lerwick in the 1950s and the response to his concertina playing was so great that he had to hire a larger mission hall for his meetings and played to a full house for a week.

Today, while the number of people playing free reed instruments has declined rapidly since the heydays of the whaling and fishing industries, there are still people



'Blin Jimmie', Buckie, early 1900s. Photograph courtesy of Buckie Fishing Heritage Centre



Norman Mackay - button accordionist from Nairnshire

in the North-east who have contributed greatly to the world of traditional music through performance and teaching work. One particularly influential performer was Peter Hall, concertina player with Aberdeen folk trio The Gaugers, famed for their interpretations of Scots folk songs in the Doric tongue.

The Button Boxes and Moothies festival, in November, is also bringing some of today's best local talent to the fore. For example, Norman Mackay (pictured), button accordion player from Nairnshire, will be joining us for concerts and workshops on the Friday and Saturday, and moothie players Murray Douglas and Billy Jolly will be coming from Kemnay and Orkney respectively. They will be joined by numerous performers from England, Ireland and Scotland, including concertina maestro Alistair Anderson (Northumberland), Jew's harp expert Michael Wright (Oxfordshire, currently living in the south of France), moothie virtuoso Will Pound (Bristol), and the excellent Irish button accordion and concertina players, Breandann Beagloich and Mary MacNamara.

The aim of the Elphinstone Institute in promoting the Button Boxes and Moothies festival (established in 2001), is to play a part in reconnecting the North-east with this important aspect of the region's musical heritage, by promoting performances, workshops, and a study day on the music of free reed instruments. The study day, which launches the festival on Friday 6 November, will bring to light some of the groundbreaking research taking place into free reed instruments, including the music of the Inuit, master Jew's harp players, and free reed instruments in Bolivia, South Africa, and Argentina.

Button Boxes and Moothies is supported by Vibrant Aberdeen, Enterprise Music Scotland, The British Forum for Ethnomusicology, Friends of the Elphinstone Institute, Scottish Culture and Traditions, and the TMSA.

www.buttonboxesandmoothies.com

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