

Greentrax: Tradition Today

Irena Příbylová

There are many approaches to traditional folk culture. Folk culture is our link to the past; it reflects the life style and values of our ancestors. It can be preserved or misused by ideology or commerce. It can become a natural part of our lives today and help us realize and develop our roots. In the globalized world of the end of the 20th century and at the beginning of the new millennium, traditional culture from far away areas can be reached easily. Taking it out of its context, we can fall in love with it or dislike it. Since 2003, the colloquies in Náměšť nad Oslavou have been focusing on transformations of tradition and the for identity through folk music, ethnic music, popular music, and world music, discovering more and more examples. In this presentation, I will focus on the music label Greentrax from Edinburgh, Scotland, and their approach to traditional folk music.

Scotland

Out of approx. 61 million inhabitants of Great Britain, there are 5 million inhabitants of Scotland¹⁾. The main language in Scotland is English, but there also are 80.000 people whose first language is Scottish Gaelic. Recently I have come across several materials in which the Scots define their roots and identity within Great Britain. According to one view, perhaps an extreme one, Scotland has been in a position of a country colonized by foreigners; because Scots have lost what they had, including their land and language, and they had to overcome problems connected with a foreign government and its institutions and new rules, while coping with the consequent traumas²⁾. Unlike other countries, such as Australia and those in Africa and the Indian subcontinent, considering Scotland under and colonial yoke means a really distant history, so not everybody is inclined to view today's Scotland as a post-colonial country. Poet and literary theorist Robert Crawford is interested in the identity and culture of modern Scotland.³⁾ Even though he does not speak about post-colonialism, he shows how the – sometimes involuntary – coexistence of Scotland and England contributed to the formation of Britain and even the British Empire. These days the trend is to see Scotland as

1) "United Kingdom." "Scotland." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 15 Jul 2008

<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=United_Kingdom&oldid=261790651>.

2) Robert Irvine. "Scottish Writing and the Idea of Culture." A lecture at Postcolonial Spring School 2005, Freie Universität Berlin, April 4 – 8, 2005.

3) Robert Crawford. "Dedefining Scotland." In *Studying British Cultures, an Introduction*. Ed. By Susan Bassnett. London and New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 973.

a culturally independent nation which keeps developing. This is quite evident in music. The music label Greentrax from Edinburgh contributes very much to the promotion of Scotland.

Greentrax

The Greentrax company was founded in 1986 by former police inspector Ian D. Green, then 52. On the occasion of the company's 20th anniversary, Green, his wife June, and his colleagues (there are five people in the company) were given many honours for services to traditional Scottish music. At the annual awards for traditional Scottish music for 2005, Ian D. Green gained the Hamish Henderson Award, also becoming a member of Traditional Scottish Music Hall of Fame. In 2006, Ian Green gained an honorary doctorate from the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Performing Arts in Glasgow.

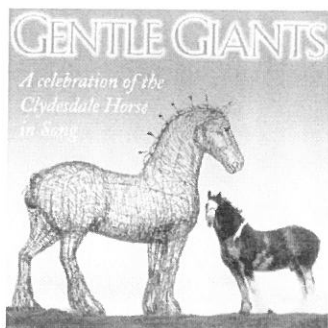
By 2008, the Greentrax Recordings catalogue included about 400 items, within a variety of series. I would like to stress here, that my listeners on Czech Radio Brno have listened to examples of many of Greentrax albums thanks to the company's policy. The variety of specialized series is quite rich. It includes traditional and contemporary groups; instrumental and vocal music; singers and songwriters; piping: band and solo; compilations – Celtic collection series; Ceilidh bands; Scottish tradition series; Gaelic songs; and songs by Robert Burns, among others. Greentrax Recordings also distributes catalogues and recordings of smaller companies, such as Culburnie, and fiddler Alasdair Fraser and his selection of music. Featured artists come from Scotland, but also from Nova Scotia (Canada), and Australia.

Gentle Giants

Tradition and the present have been linked in Greentrax through several unique projects that extend the world of music. One of these is a CD called *Gentle Giants: A Celebration of the Clydesdale Horse in Song*. The aim of the album, which was issued in 2004, was to protect a special breed of horse from the Clydesdale region in Scotland. The Clydesdale horse, knick-named the gentle giant, was bred to be able to pull three times its weight. In the past, the horse was



*Ian Green as pictured
in the 1996
Greentrax catalogue.*



CD Gentle Giants.

used for ploughing and hauling beer and was useful in industry. In the 19th century with the development of industrialization, the horse was at the peak of its fame. By the end of the 20th century, the horse was almost extinct; there only remained several dozen Clydesdale horses.

Profound information about the history and the present of the special breed of the horse can be found in a booklet accompanying *Gentle Giants*. The CD contains seventeen songs, old and new, which were inspired by the horse from the Clyde valley. The producer of the CD was Robin Laing, a Scottish folk singer and songwriter, who has been recording with Greentrax regularly. The project was financed by, among others, Lanarksire county and the Scottish Arts Council. An important contribution to the project was made by The New Makars Trust (see the webside for more). Such an organization has no counterpart in the Czech Republic: its aim is to support the creation of new songs about life in specific communities, as well as performances of these songs. There have been many communal projects by the Trust so far. The number of new songs has reached several hundred; you can also listen to them through the New Makars radio station. Nevertheless, writing songs is not the only aim of the Trust. Many of the people involved in various projects say that the work has increased their interest in the life of a specific community, contributed to their self-confidence, and developed their awareness of the needs of the community. The authors rehearsed the newly created songs for *Gentle Giants* in live performances with people of all generations in Lanarkshire county, from children and students of primary, secondary and special schools to people from retirement homes and special interest groups.

The producer Robin Laing found songs and people with close relationships with the Clydesdale horse. Reading Laing's liner notes and listening to the songs, we get a vivid picture of the rural life in the Clyde Valley. Seventeen tracks on the

CD represent seventeen stories and seventeen narrators. The present is seen with a touch of sorrow: the heavy horses had to give way to tractors and modern times. A motif of the departure from the old days was captured several times. It can be found in the song "The Last Trip Home" by Davy Steele, in the story "What's Waiting For You" by Tom Clelland, in the confession "The Last Clydesdales" from Archie Webster, in the contemplation "The Last of Your Line" from Dave Gibb, in the celebration of the gentle giant Champion in a song by Billy Stewart, or in a song based on a real event, "Gone are the Strong Ones", as performed by Christine Kydd. Singer Isla St Clair contributed an old ballad about harsh country life called "The Dying Ploughboy". Matt Armour provides an optimistic vision in his song "The Day When the Horses Come Back".

Ballads provide immortality to powerful and heavy horses. On the CD, there is a ballad about "Princie and Jean" as performed by the celebrated folk singer Tam Reid on an archive recording. A pair of horses "Hector and Bessie" wins a bet in ploughing for their master in a ballad from Alan Reid. "The Baron o' Buchlyvie" is a ballad which commemorates a horse so strong and famous that his skeleton was placed in a museum after his death. Robin Laing wrote a humorous story, "David and Goliath", about a fight between a drayman and a stubborn horse. Laing was inspired by a real story which his listeners shared with him. A huge modern statue of a Clydesdale horse was the inspiration for Chris Rodgers: he compares the tamed power of a pair of horses and a free unbound run of a horse in his song "Samson's Dreams". Singer-songwriter John Malcolm in his song retold a story of "Boxer" from George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

In spite of the variety of singers and the different ages and origins of the songs, the album's sound is homogeneous. A modest instrumental accompaniment allows the listener to focus fully on the narrator and his or her story. Most frequently, there is guitar as a backup, or played solo or in combination with other instruments from traditional or modern music; we are reminded of the Scottish tradition through the occasional use of a harp. Traditional ballads are performed with voice only – a cappella. A final (pleasant) surprise is provided by the song "The Clydesdale Horse" which is performed by fourth grade children from the community of Biggar with their teacher on piano and the author of the song, Ewan McVikar, on guitar. The song's lyrics depict a horse and his master at work from morning to evening, using a simple melody and a witty refrain.

The lyrics of the songs in *Gentle Giants* are in both English and Scottish dialect. An already extensive booklet could not hold them, so the lyrics can be found on two different websides: the New Makars Trust site and on Greentrax Recordings site, as well.

Other Projects

Apart from CDs which feature a band, musician, or singer, Greentrax Recordings usually comes out with several specialized projects and compilations a year. Among them, songs by Scottish national poet and collector Robert Burns are published in a CD series as sung by the excellent contemporary national singer Jean Redpath; they are also available in arrangements and performances by singer and guitar player Gill Bowman, or interpretations by singer songwriter Rod Patersons. Another example out of many other projects, Tony McManus records his acoustic guitar with traditional and jazz musicians from Cape Breton to Brittany and Balkans. In 2004, Greentrax Recordings launched an interesting non-commercial project called *Every Pub Should Have One*. It is a compilation of Scottish music that was supported by two other subjects from the fields of the media and the tourist industry and Greentrax distributed it for free to selected pubs.

Scottish Tradition Series

This series brings collections from the different regions of Scotland selected from the Archives of the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh. Field recordings in the Archives date back to 1951. The producers of these albums might be musicians involved in the project, university lectures with a special grant, or, in many cases, both. Many of the artists who record with Greentrax work in university music departments, so when they produce an album, they combine their professional approach with their love for music. Archive recordings are presented within a proper context. CD booklets include dozens of pages of information about the performers and collectors, about the development of the genre in a specific Scottish region, and so on. The Scottish Tradition Series has already featured various genres and regional projects, such as bothy ballads, waulking songs, fiddle music, and Gaelic bards and minstrels. In the English-speaking countries, similar projects, though published by a national institution, are developed by the American Smithsonian Institution and their Smithsonian/Folkway Recordings. In the Czech lands, also involving an institution, similar projects are developed by the National Institution for Folk Culture in Strážnice.

Women and Greentrax

Greentrax Recordings is also known for projects devoted to women, both folk singers and song writers, who sing in English and Gaelic. Even in the mid-1980s, at the beginning of its existence, Greentrax published LP records with female folk singers. In 1999, Greentrax published a special compilation called *Gaelic Women*. After its commercial success, the publisher organized a live performance of the

women involved at the Celtic Connections festival in Glasgow in January 2001. A recording of the performance was released as a double CD called *Scots Women*. There are more projects with and about women in the Greentrax catalogue now. In a similar way as with other projects, such as the *Gentle Giants* project mentioned above, the unspoken philosophy of Greentrax can be perceived here: folk music should be not only captured on a recording, it has also performed in front of the public and shared with a new generation, which can take it as an inspiration.

Sources:

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www.greentrax.com

www.newmakarstrust.org.uk