



Journey to the Isles: Marjory Kennedy Fraser

Which premiered at the Hippodrome Silent Film Festival on Thursday 17th March 2022

Written by Topher Dawson, great-grandson to Marjory Kennedy-Fraser

My mother Katrina Kennedy Fraser was the oldest daughter of David Kennedy Fraser, son of Marjory Kennedy Fraser. She used to tell me stories of my great grandmother, whose archive she and her sister Marjory (named after her famous grandmother) kept. As a child I found these dusty photos and newspaper cuttings a bit distant, but we went on holiday every year to a house on the Ross of Mull which looked over the sound of Iona to the Abbey and the village of Iona.

In the first film you have just seen, my mother aged 10 is filmed with her sisters Marjory and Daphne, and cousin John, on holiday on Iona and in Edinburgh. We see them paddling on beaches my own brother, sisters and cousins have paddled on, and my children and grandchildren.

My mother showed me as a child the memorial stone to my great grandmother in the burial ground in front of Iona Abbey, which was a great honour as it is a burial place of kings. She showed me the newspaper cuttings of the day Marjory Kennedy Fraser's ashes were buried there, with photos of a big crowd for whom a special steamer had been laid on from Oban. I began to realise that she was a very talented and famous woman with a reputation all over Europe.

As a young girl and woman, Marjory toured with her celebrated father the singer David Kennedy and their large family. I suppose they were the Scottish equivalent of the Von Trapps, a celebrated family musical group who travelled widely. When she was 12 Marjory became her father's piano accompanist and they toured Canada, the USA, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and India.

Her early life thus involved a lot of music and travel, in days when long distance travel was by sea and took months and years rather than days.

She married the mathematician and teacher Alexander Yule Fraser, who became Headmaster at Allan Glen's School in Glasgow but sadly died at the age of 33. So Marjory, also 33, found herself a widow with two young children. She taught piano and gave recitals in Edinburgh, but the great mission of her life began when she became interested in the Celtic Revival of art, music and literature.

She travelled with the painter John Duncan to Eriskay in 1905, which would have been a major expedition, and discovered Gaelic songs in danger of disappearing because of population decline. As a singer herself she set about travelling these Western Isles with a wax cylinder recording machine, assisted by the Reverend Kenneth MacLeod who had Gaelic. These recordings have been digitally archived in the School of Scottish Studies. Thus the original songs are kept for posterity in their original form.



More controversially she also arranged some of the songs for voice, piano and harp. Before recorded music was widespread, sheet music was the most common way to share music, and the taste was for songs translated into English and accompanied by piano. The original songs were unaccompanied and in Gaelic. Present day Gaelic singers and commentators have criticised Marjory for altering the songs in her arrangements and thus adulterating and polluting the purity of the Gaelic cultural heritage they represent.

My own feelings about this are that she did faithfully record, in wax cylinders and on paper, the songs she travelled to hear, and these records are still available to us.

As to her arrangements, music and song are live arts which change all the time. We are always re-inventing and re-interpreting musical culture. The changes are part of the story. I would also note that at Scotland's National Mod, choirs from all over Scotland meet to sing Gaelic songs in four-part harmony, which is another later iteration to the traditional songs which were never sung in this way.

Marjory also spread the knowledge of this Celtic music all over Europe and the world. I hope that this tour will make her life and work better known, and perhaps a new generation will come to appreciate and admire her adventurous life.

It is less well known that she campaigned for womens' votes, peace during World War 1, and Scottish Independence. I am very proud to be her descendant and the current keeper of her archive. I would be glad to share any of the printed and manuscript text, photos and music in my keeping with any interested researcher.

By **Topher Dawson**, Ullapool, Wester Ross
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