

Review Of Folksongs And Folklore Of South Uist By Margaret Fay Shaw

Posted on November 2, 2018

Introduction

Margaret Fay Shaw was an American writer who portrayed the culture and music of South Uist in her work. Her early life was spent in Pittsburg, and her parents died at an early age. Her interest in music originated when she was admitted to St Bride's School, Helensburgh. Her interest in Gaelic music increased when she heard various versions of Gaelic music. She started taking piano lessons, but after five years, she had to give up her interest in piano because of her joint pain condition. Her work *Folksongs & Folklore of South Uist* was published in 1955 and increased her popularity in Uist. She has also been awarded various honorary degrees from notable universities. She married John Lorne Campbell in 1935 and moved to the island of Canna, where she lived with her husband until her death in 2004.

The book *Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist* is the life collection of Margaret Shaw that she liked in her time in Uist. It is a collection of stories, photographs, and folk songs that describe the wonderful and magical history of South Uist and Gaelic folk music. This book describes the forgotten culture of Gael and its people and refreshes the memory of a magical world that is now forgotten[1].

Discussion

The book *Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist* uses a collection of pictures, songs and stories that she collected between 1930 and 1935[2], represent the culture of Gael. The author of this book starts by providing a very detailed introduction to Gaelic culture, its people, and their common practices. The book progresses after the introduction to include many traditional beliefs, practices, folk stories, and beliefs that have been a part of Gaelic culture since their origin. The book presents these concepts one by one in a very explanatory way. She describes each and every part of the culture in so much detail that the reader seems to consider them part of Gaelic culture. With her perfect descriptive skills and attractive writing style, the reader is amazed by the cultural history of Gaelic people and develops an interest in it. This interest motivates the reader to read further. The stories are described with pictures and additional pieces of information, which help the reader develop an image of the Gaelic culture in his mind. The book includes the history of the Gaelic culture that Shaw experienced on her trip with her sister. The pictures included in the book are her own recordings of the breathtaking views of the remains of Gaelic culture.

The second part of the book is composed of a collection of Gaelic folk songs. These songs, which have

been a part of the Gaelic culture for centuries, are explained in the book in their original Gaelic language and their English translation so that the reader can understand them. The songs are written by transcribing the recordings that Shaw found while she was in South Uist. These transcriptions were made by a native Gaelic speaker. Repeated attempts were made to record the correct punctuations and tunes of the songs[3]. The transcriptions have added punctuation and are formulated in the form of stanzas so the reader can differentiate the verses and have an idea of the original folk song. The translations of every song are provided in Shaw's own words and are described in detail. Each song is provided with its origin, and belonging as well as its purpose in Gaelic culture. In some songs, the provider's name and location are also provided. The book then compares the content with other writers and proper bibliographic references are given.

According to Schwartz and Holtorf, the songs are categorized by their theme and purpose, the theme includes songs of war, hunting, happiness as well of daily practices[4]. Margaret Shaw, in various places, writes about the customs related to the sun-wise movement of waulking cloth[5] by women. The strange culture of music that Shaw describes at various locations in her book describes this unique ritual in which a long cloth is rolled and placed on the table. Women used to sit around the table and make beats by the cloth while singing turn by turn and passing the cloth by the table.

The author mentions that she is not sure about the original purpose of the waulking ritual but believes it was meant for a good purpose[6]. Although many other books have included Gaelic songs in their literature, Shaw's book is specific in its section on Waulking songs. The author tries to explain the relationship between poetry and music of the Gaelic songs and describes their relation to each other.[7]

Conclusion

The folklore and folksongs collections though not, a perfect compilation and complete description of the Gaelic culture because it is reproduced by analyzing these practices and events, present a good understanding of the Gaelic culture and how it was once a part of majestic history. The incomplete description of the content in the book, however, does not make it bad quality writing; it is enough to explain the concept to the reader. The book allows the reader to develop a sense of Gaelic culture in his own mind and is mesmerized by the magical history of Gaelic culture.

References

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[5] Shaw, M.F. ed., 1986. Folksongs and folklore of South Uist. MacMillan Publishing Company. 14

[6] Ibid, 13

[7] Ibid 72, 73