



StrathPotomac Fiddler

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January Fiddle Club Meeting Report

by PVSFC President Becky Ross

The January meeting was hosted by Marilyn Moriarty in Arlington, Virginia. The theme for this month's music was "Music of St. Kilda." St. Kilda is a cluster of small islands; the outermost of the Outer Hebrides. Life on the islands of St. Kilda was hard; the people survived largely by raising sheep and harvesting sea birds. In the 1600s, Martin Martin wrote a book that was sort of a travelogue of the Highlands and Western Islands of Scotland. It depicted St. Kilda as exotic and remote and the popularity of the book meant more people were aware of St. Kilda than before. At its height, the population of St. Kilda was only 180. In 1930, the remaining St. Kildans were evacuated and the islands are now a bird sanctuary and weather station.

One island, Soay, was used as common grazing area for sheep. Another island, Boara, had high cliffs where North Atlantic seabirds nested. The St. Kildans used leather ropes to climb the cliffs and collect eggs and birds. The eggs were eaten and birds salted

to preserve the meat for the winter. When featherbeds were popular, the birds were a source of income from the feather trade with the mainland. The main island, Hirta, had only one spot to safely land boats, only one village and one street. Because of the fierce North Atlantic winds that blasted the islands, agriculture was very difficult as soil was easily carried off by the wind. By building stone walled enclosures, a thin layer of soil was protected and a hearty variety of oats could be grown.

We learned three tunes by ear, the first a reel with a Gaelic title meaning "I Myself Have a Laddie." The St. Kildans were unlikely to have had instruments, and most dance tunes are forms of Gaelic mouth-music where the rhythm of the words is most important. This 10-bar tune has a 4 bar A-part and 6-bar B-part. Little is known today of the dancing; in the 19th century, the St. Kildans adopted a severe form of Presbyterianism that didn't allow dancing so that tradition was lost.

The second ear tune was the strathspey "St. Kilda's Wedding." This is from the Simon Fraser collection and is traditionally played first as a strathspey and then as a reel. The last wedding in St. Kilda occurred in 1926 when the only eligible woman married the only eligible man. Everyone by then was related to two families, the McKinnons and Gillies. The third ear tune was a slow air, "St. Kilda Song," from the Scots Musical Museum collection. The English words to this tune may not be original. Other tunes this month include two laments on the death of a loved one. While the St. Kildans were renowned as skilled climbers, accidents would happen. Another tune, "Leaving St. Kilda," was written by P.M William Ross (not a St. Kildan) on the evacuation of the remaining islanders in 1930.

As usual, we finished the monthly meeting with a fine potluck and jam session afterwards.