

Music and the Clan Irwin Association Part VI

On a table in Drum Castle in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, home of the Irvines for more than 600 years, there sits a framed copy of a poem set to music entitled, *Elphinstane's Salute Tae Drum*, dated 12 September 1999. This poem is written in Doric, the Scots dialect spoken in the Northeast of Scotland, which in 2018, gained status as the third official language of Scotland along with English and Scots Gaelic. There is an extensive body of literature, mostly poetry, ballads, and songs written in this language. It is much like the Lowland or Braid Scots, the dialect used by Robert Burns in his poetry but a bit more difficult to read. To make it easier to understand, I have reprinted the poem with English translations of key words in the margin. These lovely words are so meaningful and need to be understood to appreciate the stories that are being told.

The tempo text for the tune indicates that it is to be played *Slow and stately, freely*. The melody feels a bit ponderous but probably is appropriate for the somber subject matter of the poem. The tune has a similar rhythm structure to iambic pentameter, the most common meter in English poetry. In case you cannot remember your English class, this is a line of verse with five metrical feet, each consisting of one short (or unstressed) syllable followed by one long (or stressed) syllable.

The poet writes of landmarks in all directions from Drum Castle, most designating where famous battles and skirmishes were fought. She also mentions a Lady Margaret, who is the same Peggy Coutts, the wife of Alexander, the 11th Baron of Drum, who was introduced in the article about *The Laird of Drum*. There were other Lady Margaret Irvines, but none fit the description of a lowly shepherd's daughter. A video recording of that ancient Deeside ballad, an original new arrangement produced by Jamie Laval, our contributing Scottish Fiddler, is now on our Clan Irwin Association for all to enjoy!

The first of the landmarks is to the East of the Castle, where the Battle of Harlow was fought in 1411. This was one of the bloodiest medieval battles in Scotland, called Red Harlow due to the number of lives lost, and put Donald MacDonald, the Lord of the Isles, back in his place. This was where Hector (Red) Maclean of Duart fought Alexander Irvine, the 3rd Laird of Drum to the death, leaving his brother Robert to become the next Laird and marry his wife. Alexander was laid to rest in "Drums Isle" in St Nicholas Church in Aberdeen. The very spot where Alexander asked his brother to marry his wife, was written about by our late Laird, David Irvine in an article called *The Silent Witness*, and is called the Drum Stone.

To the South of the Castle lies the River Dee, which separated the Irvines from the Keiths. These two clans battled for years until Chief David Irvine signed a peace treaty to end their 600-year feud in 2002 with the 13th Earl of Kintore, Michael Canning William John Keith, previously Chief of Clan Keith. This was done in an elaborate ceremony on the banks of the Dee. An interesting twist to this story is that the wife who Robert Irvine promised his brother to marry was Elizabeth Keith from Dunnottar. That happened in a period in which neighboring clans tried to protect their lands by betrothing their women to a man of another clan, along with a peace treaty. However, this alliance indicates that the practice did not hold up over time. The story of Robert and Elizabeth has been written about by one of their descendants, Melissa Irwin (her maiden name) in a series of three books, the *Irvines of Drum*, under the nom de plume of Mia Pride. They are a fun read!

To the West, the Battle of Corrichie was fought near Meikle Tap, near Aberdeen on 28 October 1562. This conflict was between the army of George Gordon, 4th Earl of Huntly, chief of Clan Gordon, against the forces

of Mary, Queen of Scots, under James Stewart, 1st Earl of Moray. At Corrichie, the Gordon's tactic of charging with swords was defeated by Moray's pike drill, a seriously dangerous type of Scots weapon, and Huntly fell.

The landmark to the North speaks not of a battle, but of the Cullerlie Stone Circle, also known as The Standing Stones of Echt, in Aberdeenshire. Probably built in the second millennium BC, the small circle which consists of eight irregular stones of red granite is arranged at approximately equal intervals to form a circle of 33 feet in diameter, enclosing the same number of small cairns. This verse invokes a mysterious feeling of ancient times, of witchery and intrigue.

The author of the poem is the renowned Scottish poet, Sheena Blackhall, a poet, novelist, traditional storyteller, and singer, who was born in 1947 and educated in Aberdeen. She became a Creative Writing Fellow in Scots at Aberdeen University's Elphinstone's Institute, a center for the study of Ethnology, Folklore and Ethnomusicology. She later co-edited the Elphinstone Kist, a Doric Resource publication. She has since retired but you can find her online and hear her reading some of her poems, which is delightful as the Doric is beautiful when heard.

The composer of the tune is Mary Anne Alburger, who was born in Philadelphia in 1943, and earned a Bachelor of Music with honors from Temple University there. She moved to Scotland in the 1960s, learned to play Scottish fiddle while studying in Glasgow, which became a lifelong interest, and decided to stay in Scotland. She had a career teaching fiddle and other stringed instruments in various places, as well as being a member of a Scottish Ensemble and Edinburgh Quartet at the Edinburgh Festival. She was the author of several books, the most famous probably being, Scottish Fiddlers and their Music (1983). She died in December of 2016.

Just how these two artists got together to produce this poem set to music, what occasion caused it to be written and published, and presented to Drum Castle, remains a mystery at the time of writing this article. However, who doesn't love a good mystery? I will have to leave it at that, but if anyone can help clarify if for me, it would be greatly appreciated.

As always, I invite musicians out there to join in the fun of playing these tunes, all of which are in the Music Folder in our Google Workspace, and/or creating and recording music of your own.

Susan Irvine McRae
Music Project Administrator

