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CHAPTER 1

Glasgow: Kailyard or Coal Yard?

To have been born in Glasgow in the early twentieth century is not seen as a recommendation for a budding musician. Paris would carry weight, or Dublin, in the midst of a great literary revival. But much of the literature of Scotland at the time is described uncharitably as of 'the kailyard school,' the kale yard being where coarse greens were grown at the back of small, self-satisfied homes, where folk were 'douce' and 'couthy,' humour was 'pawky'; sentiment ruled over realism, and the parochial over the international. In this school, J. M. Barrie has been unfairly cast as the leading dominie, when, in reality, the bulk of the 'kailyard' publications were produced for the English, not the Scottish market.[1] As for the radical significance of Conan Doyle, R. L. Stevenson, George Douglas, Lewis Grassic Gibbon, young MacDiarmid and others, it has yet to be fully understood outside Scottish literary circles.

As for Glasgow, it was an industrial city, wealthy and poor in equally extravagant measure; filthy with the smog and smuts of millions of coal fires; lurid with the flares of the Bessemer Converters at the mammoth steel works; and with its ears ringing with the sound of riveting in some of the greatest shipyards of the world.

These stereotypical views held sway even in Scotland well into the latter half of the twentieth century, since when appreciation of the artistic life in Glasgow in the early 1900s has largely centred round the visual arts. 'The Glasgow Boys' and the work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh now command international respect. But of music we hear and read practically nothing, and what we do read is not encouraging:

> Mr Scott, the only Scottish composer technically abreast of the highest developments of modern music in Europe and the only composer today who is endeavouring to establish a Scottish national idiom – who, in other words, has got beyond kailyairdism.[2]

Thus Hugh MacDiarmid, writing from a position of ignorance, apparently unaware of the work of J. B. McEwen or young Chisholm, but none the less imparting a home truth. It was not only the composers who were lacking. Scotland had no full-time professional orchestra, and professional opera and ballet came only with touring companies. The leading Scottish composers, Alexander Mackenzie, Hamish MacCunn and John McEwen, were in London and, though two of them had been knighted, their reputations are only now emerging from under the shadows of their English counterparts. As for Glasgow's two great pianist-composers, Eugen d'Albert and Frederic Lamond, they were both in Germany. Traditional music was largely represented by the influential but somewhat

distorted arrangements of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser; through the fading skills of the violinist James Scott Skinner; and the folksy caricatures of the music hall, for which Harry Lauder is most unreasonably criticised. Chisholm himself was not shy of expressing his dismay at the musical shortcomings of his home city:

> [I]n a town the size of Glasgow it would be extremely fortunate to find *one hundred* of its inhabitants taking a vital interest in music *as an art* (as distinct from regarding it either as so much ear-tickling or as a means to gaining an easy reputation among one's friends as a 'high-brow' by airing a little knowledge in their society).[3]

On the other hand, the part-time Scottish Orchestra sustained a substantial season of concerts in the outstanding acoustic of the St Andrew's Halls, with visiting conductors and artists of the highest distinction. Chisholm wrote:

> As a youth living in Glasgow, I remember the annual visits of the Beecham Opera Company (and under later titles) at which I and indeed the musical public of Britain heard for the first time, major operatic works like 'Boris Godunov', 'Prince Igor', 'Otello', 'Falstaff', 'Khovanschina' and 'Rosenkavalier'; with the best available English singers and an orchestra of 100 players, not at Covent Garden, but in Glasgow's own Colosseum Variety Theatre.[4]

There were also many amateur choirs, there was no shortage of pianists and organists and (not entirely lost to the lovers of classical music) a very real presence of genuine traditional music. This had been seriously researched by figures such as Lucy Broadwood, Ann Geddes Gilchrist, Frances Tolmie and John Glen, and could also be heard in piping competitions or in Gaelic-singing kirks in the city. There was also the Glasgow Athenaeum, which was the forerunner of the Royal Scottish Academy of Music, and to which Erik Chisholm naturally gravitated.[5]

But there is no denying that, in the absence of any outstanding locally based role-models, whether individual or institutional, success for a Glaswegian in the world of music was likely to depend upon a combination of inborn talent, personal determination and parental support. Chisholm had all three in profusion.

Erik Chisholm was born in Cathcart, Glasgow, on 4 January 1904, the son of John Chisholm (illus. 1) and Elizabeth McGeachy MacLeod. He was the middle of three brothers, John Sinclair ('Jack') being born in December 1899 and Archibald MacLeod ('Archie') in October 1907. Archie was an accountant, became Treasurer of the Active Society for the Propagation of Contemporary Music (Erik's brainchild), and was later to follow Erik to South Africa.

Chisholm's father ran the family firm of painters and decorators, which had its offices at 63 Berkeley Street, Glasgow. It was a well-established business, built up over three generations, John Chisholm being a master painter. In the early years of his marriage, Erik was occasionally to add to his meagre income by working for the company, but in his childhood and youth the Chisholm household was

1 Erik Chisholm's father, John Chisholm, *c.* 1916

financially secure, and there were no early pressures on young Erik to pay his way in the world, which is just as well, for he was not a strong child. He had had influenza as a baby[6] and had to stop formal schooling at thirteen.[7] His mother once declared, 'you could blow peas through Erik's ribs'.[8]

He was not happy at school and was, no doubt, relieved to leave it, although he seems to have been able to make other people less than happy, too:

> Playing kick the can, ringing door bells or tying opposite door knobs together, pushing younger and weaker lads into beds of stinging nettles, were some of my favourite games, when I was at Junior School.[9]

He had buck teeth, but had them all taken out while still in his twenties, and wore spectacles all his life to counteract his short-sightedness, sometimes having to remove them and bring whatever he was studying right up to his eyes.[10] When the Second World War broke out, he was classed as Grade 4 and so rejected for military service.[11] He had also broken his arm when he fell off the Crocodile Rock at Millport, where the family regularly holidayed; and since it had not been reset straight, he was unable to hold a rifle properly.[12] Fortunately it did not inhibit his organ or piano playing.

Throughout his life he suffered from severe, sometimes incapacitating migraines. His student, Alex Beveridge, recalled the pallor in his face and his having to ask to be helped to another room, and Chisholm describing 'stars falling – falling all over my eyes'.[13] Frightening visual disturbances of this nature are

associated with chronic migraines. It was something he had to learn to cope with, and he coped 'very well' in the view of one of his doctors.[14] In other respects, he seems to have been a thoroughly normal child, and he recalls family life with disarming humour and a story-teller's proper use of exaggeration. It is worth quoting extensively from the following childhood recollections, which give a delightful insight into upper-middle-class society of the period:

> It was my father's dearest wish to keep his three sons 'off the street' … He added an extra storey on the top of our semi-detached house at 28 Corrour Road, Newlands, Glasgow, which would accommodate a full-size billiard table (incidentally, burning down the whole house and that of our next door neighbour in the process!) He bought us a 35mm projector, complete with arc lamp, slide attachment, a selection of cowboy films and newsreels, but no motor. There were none in those days. So every time we had a cinema show, which was usually Friday or Saturday nights, my eldest brother, Jack, had to 'caw the haun'le' (turn the handle) of the projector to make it go. It was a pretty strenuous task – for a 350m. reel lasted 15 minutes. It was no joke to keep turning without a break for a quarter of an hour or more. …
>
> My brother Jack came in for more than his fair share of turning the handle of the ice-cream freezer, packed around with ice, which became harder and harder to push as the ice embedded itself closer into the freezer. My Mother's ice cream – made from real cream and fresh strawberries – was marvellous. There's nothing like it, nowadays, with the mass-produced, slick, sleek, tasteless, synthetic, characterless, professional manufactured stuff, mis-called 'ice cream'. …
>
> To return to the cinematograph, bioscope or movie, our proud family record in this field goes back before even the invention of the movie camera. In 1903, or thereabouts, my Uncle James blew himself through the ceiling when an acetylene contraption he was adjusting went wrong. If I close my eyes right now, I can see the hole in the ceiling where he went through.
>
> Another early memory of the movies was the gorgeous time when Father took us all for a holiday to the Island of Millport. … Three or four times a week as soon as it was dark, there was an open-air film show. From our sitting-room windows we could watch the whole show free in the comfort of our own home. … [T]he thrilling climax, when the Mounties stormed in to release the captured garrison and hacked to bits the treacherous Red Indians, always made fine viewing. Especially when accompanied by the strains of the *William Tell* Overture. A doing-his-best-so-don't-shoot-me-five-bob-an-hour movie pianist played this on a museum piece, all-but upright piano.
>
> When I got older, my Dad bought me a Pathe-Baby Cine Camera with stand and my brother Archie and I started up a Glasgow Cine Club for making our own movies. One of the pictures we shot on 9.5 mm stock, was called *The Gas Trap*, a thriller with camera work by the Chisholms which made that of Clair, Einstein, Fritz Lang and D. W. Griffiths look just plain silly.[15]

But what of music in the midst of all this entertainment? According to Chisholm's daughters, the family was not musical, but when asked what was the chief turning-point in his career, the first one Erik mentioned was hearing Beethoven's 'Moonlight' Sonata on a pianola-roll at the age of about seven – 'a magical revelation which still remains with me'.[16] When his daughters attempted the same piece, they could never live up to that seminal moment and felt quite crushed by his criticism.

Apart from the 'Moonlight' Sonata experience, there is only one other clue as to the origins of Chisholm's interest in music, found in a casual remark at the end of a 1950 review of a Chisholm work, referring to his mother as a 'still well-known singer'.[17] None of Chisholm's daughters has any recollection of their grandmother singing. They recall her as a somewhat forbidding lady, well turned out in hat and gloves: a good wife and mother to her boys, but with less interest in her grandchildren.

There is no clear account of when Erik started composing, but in 1950 a newspaper reported that his mother, 'Forty years ago … heard her young son Erik playing the piano – he was idling with variations on a little Scots folk-tune. A year later it became his first opus (unofficial)'.[18] This would make him six or seven years old. Some three years later came another seminal moment, with the gift of Patrick MacDonald's *A Collection of Highland Vocal Airs*, published in 1784.

> I first came across Macdonald when I was a boy of 10. My parents used to take us all to the Island of Millport for our summer holidays. On one occasion we stayed at a boarding house run by a friendly Scots family of the name of Stewart. They presented me with a bundle of old music, and in a very handsome leather volume bound in along with 'Home Sweet Home and Variations', 'The Dying Poet', 'Battle March of Delhi' (Overture to Maritana) was the Macdonald collection of Highland vocal music. I very soon realised that this latter was of some value, and it is many, many years since I tore it from its bourgeoise surroundings, and have trailed it around with me ever since.[19]

Indeed he had. His much-used, much-annotated copy shows that he had turned these pages often.[20] Many of the airs were subsequently used for his *Scottish Airs for Children* and *A Celtic Song Book*, and several of his other Scottish works. Such must have been his interest in the MacDonald collection, and in music in general, that he was allowed to leave school to pursue music. Perhaps his parents also realised that his musical talents were not being adequately nurtured in the class-room:-

> When I was 13, and a pupil of Queens Park Secondary School our music mistress was a Miss Polly White who during a rehearsal by Class 1a of which I was a rebellious pupil of 'A hundred pipers and a' and a'' said to me, 'Erik do please stop singing. You are dragging the whole class out of tune.'[21]

Whatever Miss White's opinion of his singing, Erik left school and moved

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