

The Old Woman's Lullaby

There are settings of this tune in the following manuscript sources:

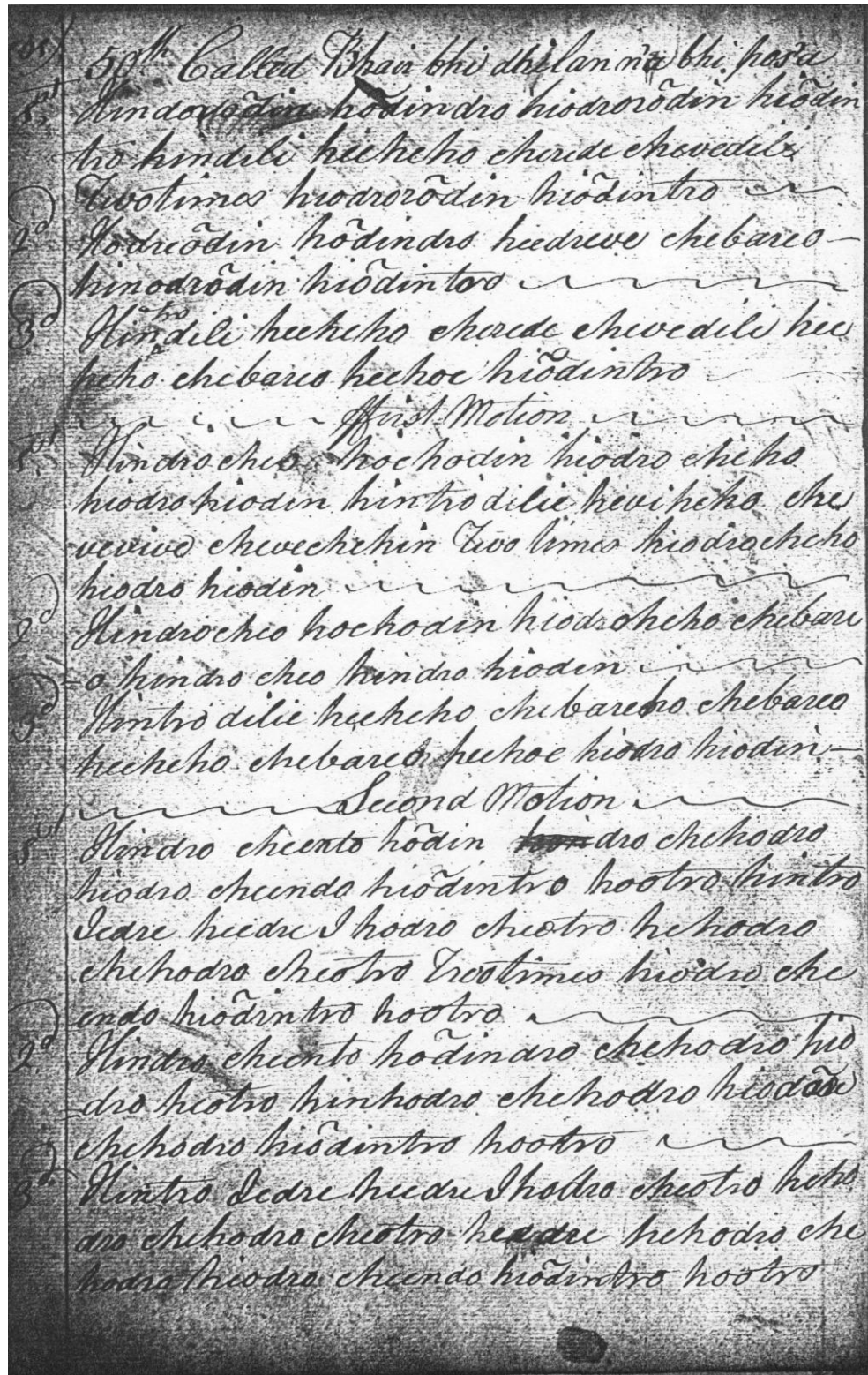
- **Colin Mór Campbell's** "Nether Lorn Canntaireachd," i, 101;
- **Angus MacKay's** MS, ii, 33 (and in the so-called "Kintarbert MS" f. 13);
- **Colin Cameron's** MS, f.55;
- **Duncan Campbell of Foss's** MS, f.37;
- **Uilleam Ross's** MS, ff.83-4;
- **D. S. MacDonald's** MS, f.58;
- **David Glen's** MS, f.152;
- **Robert Meldrum's** MS, f.237;

and in the following published sources:

- **Uilleam Ross**, *Ross's Collection*, pp.32-3;
- **C. S. Thomason**, *Ceol Mor*, pp.44-5;

Titles for this tune vary: in the Nether Lorn manuscript, it is "*B'fhearr bhith glan na a bhith posda*" (see below); Glen notes that John MacKay calls it "George Donn MacKenzie's Lament." In Uilleam Ross's MS the title is "Seaforth's Lament" and Angus MacKay's title is "The Old Woman's Lullaby in the Mountain."

Colin Campbell sets the tune like this:



pipes | drums

Professor Colm O'Boyle of Aberdeen University, the leading authority on terms of art in Highland music, suggests the Nether Lorn title may mean "*Better to be pure [or clean?] than to be married*" (private correspondence). This suggests to the present writer that it may be yet another an example of the widely-diffused folk theme: "Better to be a maid than married" or "I wish I was a single girl again."

Angus MacKay sets the tune like this:

33

Grònan na bailleach sa Bheinn Bhric.
The old Woman's Lullaby in the Mountain.

The image shows a handwritten musical score on aged paper. The title is written in cursive at the top. The score consists of ten staves of music, each beginning with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and accidentals. There are two variations marked: 'var. 1st.' and 'var. 2nd.'.

The version in MacKay's Kintarbert MS is on similar lines:

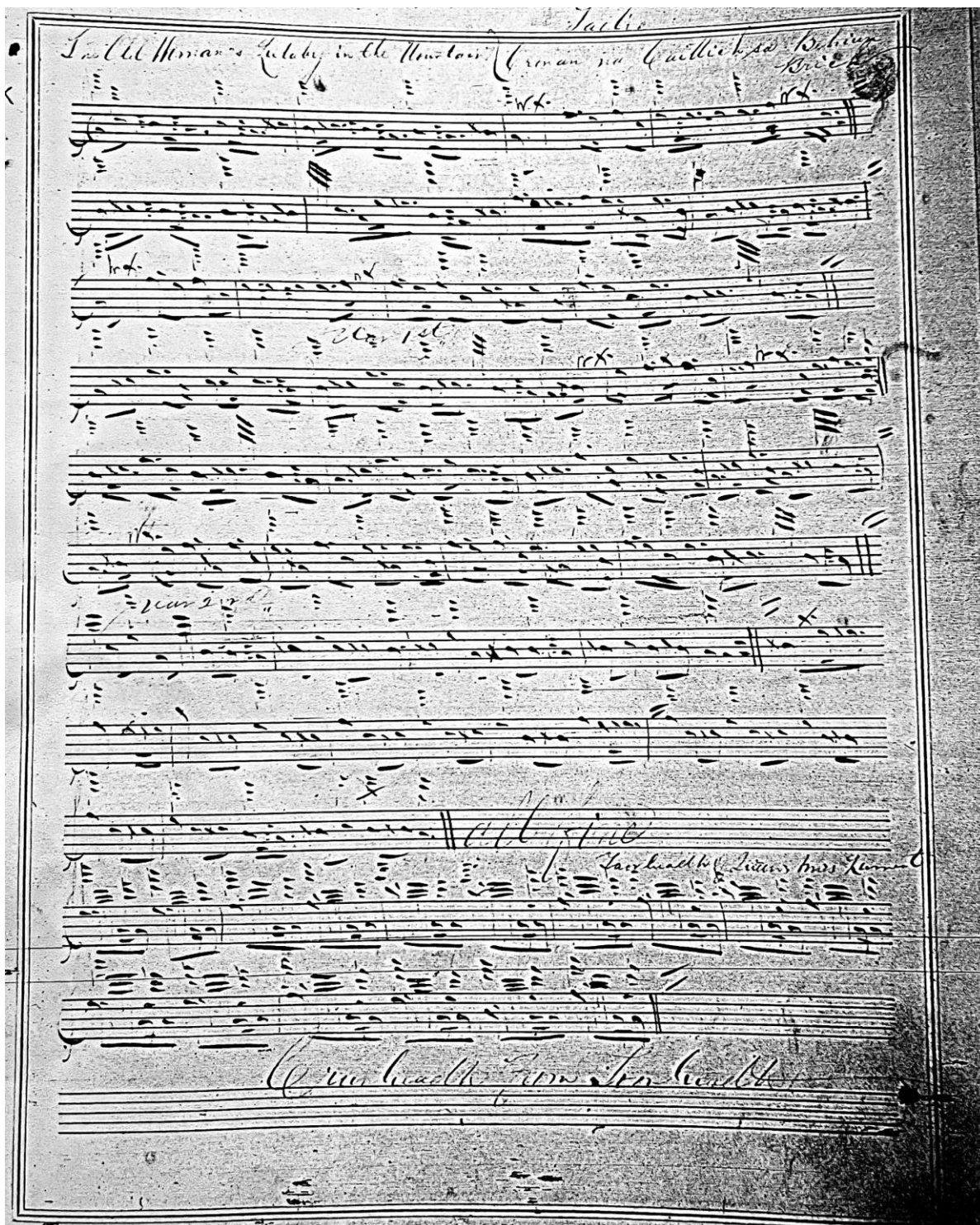
13

Brònan na bailleach sa bhinn bhruic

16. x 12

D. B. Thoma

Colin Cameron sets the tune like this:



Here we see several interesting differences from the version in MacKay: including the addition of taorluath and crunluath duinte variations, and a shapelier approach to the end of the ground.

Duncan Campbell of Foss adds little to the interpretation suggested in the MacKay scores, and is not reproduced here. **Uilleam Ross's** two scores, titled "Seaforth's Lament" in the Manuscript and "The Old Woman's Lullaby" in his published book, do not differ significantly from MacKay and neither is reproduced here. **Robert Meldrum's** score does not differ significantly from MacKay's and is not reproduced here.

David Glen sets the tune like this:

152.

Sea for his Lament

The Old Woman's Lullabye. (George Donn Mackenzy's Lament in 2nd Macky's)

76.

Var. 1st

Var. 2nd

* Part of 1st var. omitted.

Var. 3rd

Var. 4th

Var. 5th

Var. 6th

Var. 7th

Var. 8th

Var. 9th

Var. 10th

Var. 11th

Var. 12th

Var. 13th

Var. 14th

Var. 15th

Var. 16th

Var. 17th

Var. 18th

Var. 19th

Var. 20th

Var. 21st

Var. 22nd

Var. 23rd

Var. 24th

Var. 25th

Var. 26th

Var. 27th

Var. 28th

Var. 29th

Var. 30th

Var. 31st

Var. 32nd

Var. 33rd

Var. 34th

Var. 35th

Var. 36th

Var. 37th

Var. 38th

Var. 39th

Var. 40th

Var. 41st

Var. 42nd

Var. 43rd

Var. 44th

Var. 45th

Var. 46th

Var. 47th

Var. 48th

Var. 49th

Var. 50th

Var. 51st

Var. 52nd

Var. 53rd

Var. 54th

Var. 55th

Var. 56th

Var. 57th

Var. 58th

Var. 59th

Var. 60th

Var. 61st

Var. 62nd

Var. 63rd

Var. 64th

Var. 65th

Var. 66th

Var. 67th

Var. 68th

Var. 69th

Var. 70th

Var. 71st

Var. 72nd

Var. 73rd

Var. 74th

Var. 75th

Var. 76th

Var. 77th

Var. 78th

Var. 79th

Var. 80th

Var. 81st

Var. 82nd

Var. 83rd

Var. 84th

Var. 85th

Var. 86th

Var. 87th

Var. 88th

Var. 89th

Var. 90th

Var. 91st

Var. 92nd

Var. 93rd

Var. 94th

Var. 95th

Var. 96th

Var. 97th

Var. 98th

Var. 99th

Var. 100th

Var. 101st

Var. 102nd

Var. 103rd

Var. 104th

Var. 105th

Var. 106th

Var. 107th

Var. 108th

Var. 109th

Var. 110th

Var. 111st

Var. 112nd

Var. 113rd

Var. 114th

Var. 115th

Var. 116th

Var. 117th

Var. 118th

Var. 119th

Var. 120th

Var. 121st

Var. 122nd

Var. 123rd

Var. 124th

Var. 125th

Var. 126th

Var. 127th

Var. 128th

Var. 129th

Var. 130th

Var. 131st

Var. 132nd

Var. 133rd

Var. 134th

Var. 135th

Var. 136th

Var. 137th

Var. 138th

Var. 139th

Var. 140th

Var. 141st

Var. 142nd

Var. 143rd

Var. 144th

Var. 145th

Var. 146th

Var. 147th

Var. 148th

Var. 149th

Var. 150th

Var. 151st

Var. 152nd

Var. 153rd

Var. 154th

Var. 155th

Var. 156th

Var. 157th

Var. 158th

Var. 159th

Var. 160th

Var. 161st

Var. 162nd

Var. 163rd

Var. 164th

Var. 165th

Var. 166th

Var. 167th

Var. 168th

Var. 169th

Var. 170th

Var. 171st

Var. 172nd

Var. 173rd

Var. 174th

Var. 175th

Var. 176th

Var. 177th

Var. 178th

Var. 179th

Var. 180th

Var. 181st

Var. 182nd

Var. 183rd

Var. 184th

Var. 185th

Var. 186th

Var. 187th

Var. 188th

Var. 189th

Var. 190th

Var. 191st

Var. 192nd

Var. 193rd

Var. 194th

Var. 195th

Var. 196th

Var. 197th

Var. 198th

Var. 199th

Var. 200th

Var. 201st

Var. 202nd

Var. 203rd

Var. 204th

Var. 205th

Var. 206th

Var. 207th

Var. 208th

Var. 209th

Var. 210th

Var. 211st

Var. 212nd

Var. 213rd

Var. 214th

Var. 215th

Var. 216th

Var. 217th

Var. 218th

Var. 219th

Var. 220th

Var. 221st

Var. 222nd

Var. 223rd

Var. 224th

Var. 225th

Var. 226th

Var. 227th

Var. 228th

Var. 229th

Var. 230th

Var. 231st

Var. 232nd

Var. 233rd

Var. 234th

Var. 235th

Var. 236th

Var. 237th

Var. 238th

Var. 239th

Var. 240th

Var. 241st

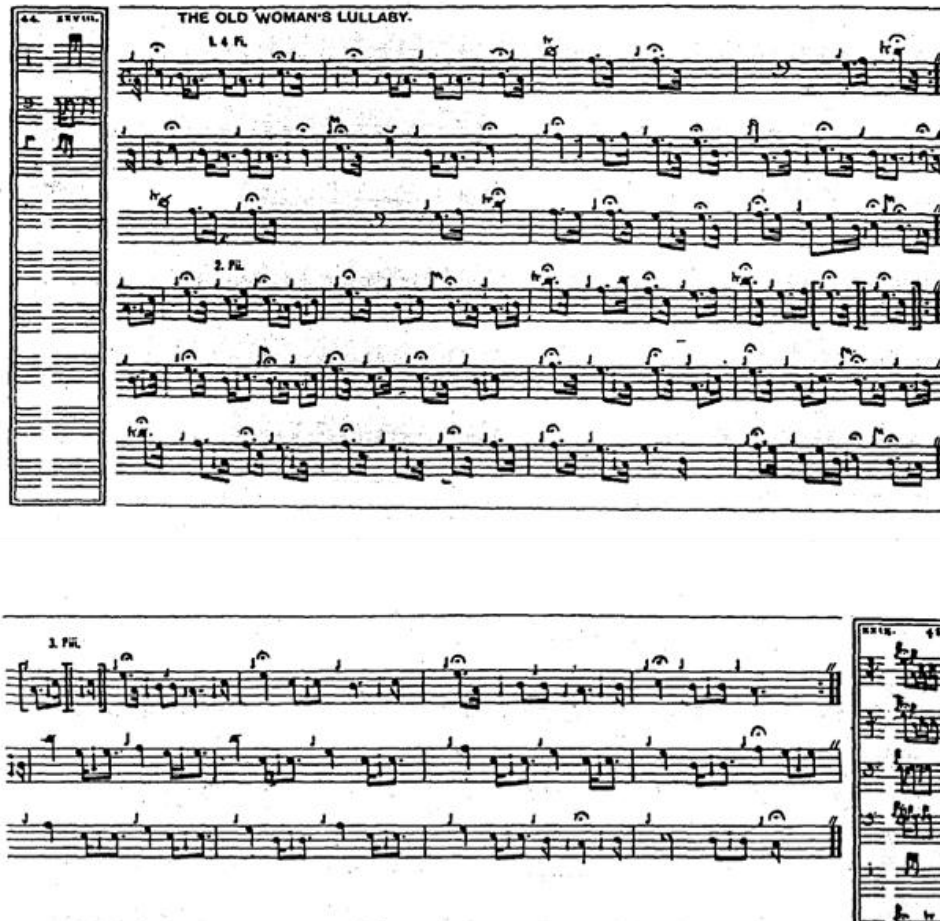
Var. 242nd

Var. 243

pipes | drums

Glen adds taorluath and crunluath variations for this tune as does **Colin Cameron**. It is interesting that two independent sources should consider this possibility. Opinions will probably differ as to their aesthetic merits.

C.S. Thomason sets the tune like this:



Thomason cites Angus MacKay's MS, Uilleam Ross's published book, and Donald MacKay as his sources, and that this is one of the tunes Donald MacKay was taught directly by Donald Cameron, yet his treatment of the second variation differs from that of Colin Cameron above. The opening gesture of the second variation (the notes enclosed in single square brackets) seems misplaced; most of the surviving testimony suggests that the sequence should begin with the grip on C that follows.

Commentary:

There have been attempts to link this tune to an important figure from Scottish folklore, the Cailleach of Beinn a' Bhric, the great herdswoman of the deer. Here is the version recorded by General Thomason in his "Ceol Mor Legends":

Scottish Legends MS 3749 f 47

XXVIII

47

The Old Woman's Lullaby.

XXIV. 47
(174)

(Cronan na Chailleach Bheinne Bheie)

from J. F. Campbell's "Sgùilachdan Cairdeachail"

Chailleach Bheinne Bheie lived in Jura, at Lagie Brea, & had a ball of thread by which she could draw towards her any person or thing, if she could throw the ball beyond them.

She got Mac Phie of Colonsay into her toils, & would not part with him. Every time he attempted to leave her, she used to intercept him, & even after he got into his Biorlinn, or barge, & got off from the shore, she would get him ashore again, by throwing the ball into the boat. At last he pretended perfect contentment in his bondage, & got the secret from her that she had a hatchet which would cut the thread on the anchoring line. He watched ^{an} the opportunity and stole the hatchet, having previously ordered his boat to be in waiting at Cnoc Brea at the foot of Beann a Chaoir. He set out by the dawn of day, & was seated in his boat before the Chailleach got to the top of the hill, which she had climbed with speed, as soon as she missed him. When she saw him in the boat, she cried out most pitiously:—

Ceol Mor Legends MS 3749 & 48

20.

XXIV (274)

48

A Mhàir a Phìr

Oh! Mac Phìr

A Shàoil's Thadgaith

My Coe & treasure

An d'fhag thu air aca

Hast thou left me on

(chladach mi?)

(the strand?)

And this she often repeated throwing at the same time the Cearla Shruithraidh, magic clure, into the boat, & drawing it towards the shore. But when she saw the threat cut the boat rowing off beyond her reach, she got desperate, & slid down which is called Sgrìob na Cailich, crying out: -

A Mhàir a Phìr

Oh! Mac Phìr

Channich, granda

Rough skinned & foul

An d'fhag thu air a

Hast thou left me on the

(chladach mi?)

(strand?)

Sgrìob na Cailich is a very curious & conspicuous mark on the northwestern side of the highest of the Jura hills. Two rocky gorges begin at the very top of the hill, which were made by the Carlin's heels, & two strips of bare grey boulders extend across the E side of lower hills almost to the sea.

In her time the island of Jura was under the sway of Macdonald of Islay, but this Carlin was so powerful, that she would not allow the Islay foot to pass through Jura for she killed him as soon as he crossed the ferry.

Cool War Legends M 3749 f. 49

XXVIII

21.

XXIV

(374)

49

MacDonald spoke to a sure man of the name of Buie, who lived at the ferry, & promised him the farm of Largie Breac, where the Cairnack lived, to him & his heirs for ever, if he would kill her.

Buie told his wife the offer that MacDonald had made him, remarking at the same time, that he would never attempt to encounter the giantess.

Their eldest son, however, overheard his father, & set off the next day to offer battle to the Cairnack.

They had wrestled hard & long, when at length the Cairn brought young Buie on his knee, & she said "Thou art in extremity, which

meads Buie, & pity it is so". He replied "My grandmother, on the hillside of Alba, is here, & will come to help me if I be" & put his hand on his dirk.

They engaged again, & she brought him on his knees again, saying the same words, when young Buie drew his dirk & stabbed her to the heart.

MacDonald performed his promise of giving Largie Breac to the Buies who held it for centuries after.

There is a song about this same personage, whoever she may have been. Though not very comprehensible it runs thus:-

Col Mac Iegwals MS 3749 f 50:

XXVII

222

XXXV (474.)

50

Cairach Bheinnna Bhrì hoo

Bhrì hoo Bhrì hoo

Cairach Bheinnna Bhrì hoo

Cairach mhor leathan and

Cha drachaidh mo bhuidheann fhadh

Bhuidheann fhadh bhuidheann fhadh

Cha drachaidh mo bhuidheann riann

A dh'iarraidh chlaba do 'n traigh.

Carlin ⁱⁿ ~~the~~ Ben Breac hoo &

Carlin great, broad, high

There went not my troop of deer

There went not my troop even

To seek her back to the strand.

This old woman, or set of old women guarding a sword, or owning magic elms, & living in an island, are surely the same as the Granch, of whom many stories are told in Brittany & these are presumed to have been Druidical wife (Fryer Briton vol 1 p 157); & if so, the Carlin may be a fiction founded on fact.

(2d. The construction of this beautiful Pibroch is unlike that of any other known to me. If Campbell is right in connecting the Carlin with Druids, extreme antiquity may account for its being so unique.)

pipes | drums

Given the numerous alternative titles, and the fact that the tune in its pipe versions seems manifestly a different one from the Gaelic folk song of the same title, it might be wise to proceed cautiously here.

The tune is pentatonic, gapped at the fourth interval of the scale. Its strong melodic appeal and compact, powerful musical argument have long made it popular.

Electronic text © Dr. William Donaldson, Cambridge Massachusetts, 27 December 2025