From Photo by D. Whyte, Inverness.

A CHUIGEAL.

MARY MACPHERSON
(Màiri Mhòr nan Òran)
Great Mary of the Songs

From Photo by D. Whyte, Inverness.

"Her nostalgic songs for Skye strongly evoke freedom, plentifulness, community: her petticoat is tugged by the heather, barrels overflow with salted meat, trips are made to weddings and waulkings in the winter, with the path lit by a glowing peat."

A History of Scottish Women's Writing
Edited by Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan

highlife
highland
na gàidhealtachd

To find out more about Màiri Mhòr, visit the display in the Reference Library at Inverness Library.

Mary MacPherson (known as Màiri Mhór nan Ōran) was born Mary Macdonald in Skeabost, Skye on the 10th March 1821. Her family were crofters. She moved to Inverness in 1844 and married a shoemaker, Isaac MacPherson, whose own family were from Skye. On the death of her husband in 1871, she took work as a domestic servant but was accused of stealing. She professed her innocence but was imprisoned for 40 days. She stated that this was "the humiliation I suffered/which brought my verse alive".[1] Her sense of injustice was expressed in much of her writing, such as her poem *Tha mi sgith de luchd na Beurla* (I'm tired of the English speakers).

After her release she moved to Glasgow and trained as a nurse. In 1876 she moved to Greenock but often visited Glasgow for cèilidhs, where there was a large community of Gaelic-speaking people. She retired to Skye in 1882 and by now had a considerable reputation for her songs and her championing of crofters rights. She was involved in Highland Land League meetings and supported advocates for reform such as John Murdoch, the campaigning journalist and founder of *The Highlander,* and the historian, Alexander Mackenzie. She campaigned for the election to parliament of Charles Fraser-Mackintosh, the Inverness solicitor and politician, who was also a supporter of reform.

Mary's Gaelic verses were considered influential in promoting the campaign for land reform to the non-english speaking community. Her poems were written down by other people because although she could read, she could not write them herself (she knew 18,000 lines of traditional poetry by heart[2]). She sang at the first National Mòd in Oban in 1892. She died on the 7th November 1898 and was buried beside her husband in Chapel Yard Cemetery in Inverness. A gravestone was erected by Charles Fraser-Mackintosh.

1. An Leabhar Mòr: The Great Book of Gaelic. Edited by M. MacLean & T Dorgan
2. A History of Scottish Women's Writing. Edited by D. Gifford & D McMillan

"Moch 's mi 'g èirigh ...
The last home of
Mary MacPherson
Màiri Mhòr nan Òran
**1821-1898
Gaelic Poetess and Bard**
...air bheagan eislein air madainn Cheitein 's mi ann an Os"
Portree Local History Society

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Her poetry …….. provides an essential body of Gaelic evidence relating to the highland land movement. Angus Macbain, the Celtic scholar, believed that her songs contributed to the success of crofter candidates in the 1885-6 elections, and described her as the bard of the movement."

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

"It is in Màiri Mhòr nan Òran (1821-1898) that we at last find a poet plucky enough to examine her own times and to analyse, however crudely, how and why the Clearances occurred. Far from being invisible by her sex, Màiri Mhòr is one of the principal icons of Gaelic poetry. This is probably because of her warm-hearted championing of her fellow highlanders at the time of Clearance and emigration"

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"Her singing of Gaelic poetry, and her ability in relating Highland stories, were greatly appreciated in the houses of her Skye friends. She was a woman of striking appearance, and during the latter years of her life always carried about, with feelings of pride, the handsome silver-mounted walking-stick presented to her by the late Professor Blackie…………..Yesterday the remains were conveyed by steamer and rail from Portree to Inverness. At the Railway Station a funeral procession was formed, Provost MacBean and Mr Kenneth Macdonald, Town-Clerk, being amongst the mourners."

Inverness Courier 11th November 1898