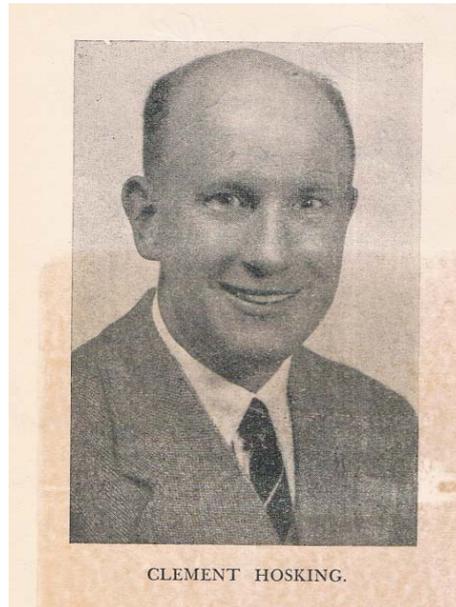


Edwin Clement Hosking (1896-1966) - singer, teacher and folklorist

Clement Hosking by John Coombs



"Fine Song for Singing" is one of the loveliest books I have ever read. It was written by an Australian, Clement Hosking, who spent a summer just before the Second World War listening to and writing down the traditional songs and tunes sung by the people in the Western Isles of Scotland. Very little research has been done on the subject of Clement Hosking. Even the article about him in the Australian Dictionary of Biography <<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/hosking-edwin-clement-10550>> lacks detail.[1] Lest his contribution to the preservation of traditional songs and music of the British Isles pass into oblivion, I have honoured his memory by gathering as much material about him as possible in this article.

Edwin Clement Hosking was born in Adelaide. His father came from Yorkshire, but his grandfather had been a Cornishman, and Clement's initial introduction to the traditional music of the British Isles was as a child listening to his father sing the songs and melodies which his own father had taught him. These songs and melodies, however, appeared to be out of tune on certain notes. When he grew up and had acquired a greater knowledge of music, Hosking realised that the melodies had not been out of tune at all; and that they probably formed part of a folk tradition of Cornish singing, which was never written down, and which by the early twentieth century had been forgotten.

Hosking himself showed an aptitude for singing at an early age. He sang as soloist in church choirs. At sixteen he was awarded a scholarship to a school of music in Adelaide. He was a boy chorister in the College Park Choir, which performed throughout South Australia. He also sang in the chapel of St Peter's College in Adelaide.

By the age of seventeen Hosking had decided on a musical career, but his ambitions in this direction were delayed by World War One. He enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force in 1916, and after serving in Europe from September 1917 Hosking was discharged in 1919. While he was in the army he was able to spend some time in England and Wales, and he was impressed by both the sheer volume of traditional music surviving in the British Isles and by the wide range of styles. About this period of his life he later wrote:

"The war meant its privations, but there were many consolations. During visits to London and other places one had many opportunities of hearing how music was performed on the other side. I spent some delightful evenings at performances by the Beecham Opera Company, both at the Aldwych

Theatre and Drury Lane, not to mention the concerts. While in England I had the privilege of singing at a few small concerts, as well as in some fine old churches." [2]

After returning to Adelaide, Clement Hosking then moved to Sydney to further his career as a singer, studying at the State Conservatorium of Music, Sydney <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sydney_conservatorium_of_music>. In 1921 he opened a studio in George Street, where he taught singing until 1952, advertising himself as a teacher of voice production, singing and interpretation. He was advised by Archibald Sessions, organist at the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York, to try his luck there; but he remained in Sydney and in 1925 became Director of Music at what was then the Pitt Street Congregational Church at a salary of fifty pounds per annum. [3] In 1926 Hosking resigned from that position to become musical director of Radio 2GB, where he stayed until 1930.

The world of Radio was very different from what it is today. Radio stations did not have large collections of recorded music, and so a lot of broadcasting had to be of live music. At that time 2GB maintained a permanent string quartet, and Clement Hosking formed a 2GB choir out of which he also formed two vocal quartets. One of these quartets had to sing eight to twelve songs on air every Wednesday night. This led Hosking to use that 'vast treasury of British traditional music' as a source for the new material he continually needed.

The 'GB' in 2GB stood for 'Giordiano Bruno', who was burnt at the stake for heresy in Rome in the year 1600. Although Bruno's ideas displeased his contemporaries, they have struck a responsive chord with occultists and spiritual seekers since that time. Theosophists believed that Bruno was a former incarnation of Annie Besant, and the Theosophical Society, which founded and controlled Radio 2GB for many years, gave their station Giordiano Bruno's initials because the letters AB (Annie Besant) were already in use. The aim of 2GB was to 'theosophise Australia' and the programming was unashamedly highbrow, more so even than 2BL and 2FC, precursors of the ABC.

One programme which 2GB listeners could tune into regularly was the Sunday High Mass at St Alban's Liberal Catholic Pro-cathedral at Redfern, normally presided over by Bishop Leadbeater. Clement Hosking's involvement with Theosophy—he was a member of the society from 1927 to 1938—led him to the Liberal Catholic Church. He was baptised at the Chapel at the Manor, the Theosophical establishment at Mosman, on 11 September 1928 and confirmed on 11 November. [4] On 17 November he was admitted to Minor Orders and made a subdeacon on 16 December. In 1929 on 6 January, Hosking was ordained deacon by Bishop Leadbeater and on 10 March the Bishop ordained him to the priesthood at St Albans, Redfern. Hosking officiated at Vespers at St Albans that night, said his first Mass on Thursday 23 April and became priest in charge of the Liberal Catholic Church at Chatswood. He was also a member of an organisation called the Fellowship of Pioneers, run by the Theosophical Society under the patronage of King George V, to 'celebrate the lives of world benefactors'. [5]

Clement Hosking's interest in the folk music of the British Isles had already been awakened by his childhood experiences, his time spent in the United Kingdom during World War One, and his need to expand the repertoires of the choir and ensembles he ran for 2GB; but it was the depression years that gave this interest a real stimulus since it is likely that he had fewer pupils to teach in his George Street Studio. The 'ill-wind of the economic depression', he wrote, 'blew me the good fortune of unusual leisure.' [6] He also left the position of Music Director at 2GB in 1930. At this time Hosking moved from being an 'interested visitor' to a 'worshipper' at the shrine of folk music and he described his joy when he was given the first volume of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser's three volume collection of The Songs of the Hebrides, which he had first seen in Wales during World War One: [7]

"Only gradually did I enter into this treasure-house of unlimited store, but the more I studied the songs the stronger became their appeal ... I found an underlying something in this 'stern, stark Hebridean stuff' infinitely appealing, and altogether new to me, though none the less of a world to which I belonged—the Celtic world of my forefathers in long-forgotten days. I pored over the letter-press; I began to memorise the legends translated by Kenneth Macleod; I haunted bookshops for further treasures. Fortune smiled on me in my quest, for I came across Alasdair Alpin MacGregor's 'Behold the Hebrides', with its fascinating photographs, and Mrs Kennedy-Fraser's 'A Life of Song', which soon displaced H. Plunkett Greene's 'Interpretation of Song' from its pride of place as a bedside companion." [8]

As a result, in September 1933 Clement Hosking gathered a number of his past and present students together to form the Sydney Folk-Song Choir. Its purpose was to sing the folk-songs of many lands, with the singers dressed in the costumes of the countries to which the songs belonged. Hosking directed this choir until 1952 when it disbanded. The choir gave live performances in Sydney suburbs and radio broadcasts as well, with commentary on the songs by Hosking himself.

This led naturally to debate about what was the nature of a folk-song. Clement Hosking did not believe that Australia had such things, whereas Russel Ward of the University of New England believed that we did, and offered 'Bold Jack Donohoe' as an example. [9] The debate lasted a long time. In 1935 Hosking wrote to the Bulletin stating that a song was only considered a folk-song in Europe if it came from the peasantry. He queried whether there was anything peculiarly Australian about songs such as 'Botany Bay' or 'The Black Velvet Band'. [10] Douglas Stewart, on the other hand, wrote to Hosking in 1958 arguing that Australia did indeed possess genuine folk-songs. [11]

Clement Hosking made up his mind to visit the Hebrides and experience the musical traditions of the Isles first hand. Angus Macdonald had been sufficiently impressed by his singing to spend a year teaching him Gaelic. He received letters of introduction from the Governor of New South Wales, Lord Wakehurst, to his sister Lady Strathcona, from Father Sydney MacEwan, Heloise Russel-Ferguson and Angus Macdonald. To help raise funds to cover his expenses, a committee was formed, which included William Morris Hughes and Dame Mary Gilmore (who wrote the foreword to *Fine Song for Singing*). A Folk Festival was organised in his honour at the Conservatorium of Music and in August 1937 Clement Hosking embarked on his journey. The music critic of the Glasgow Herald interviewed him about his trip and described it as follows:

"Last autumn I had the pleasure of meeting Mr Clement Hosking, a vocalist and teacher in Sydney, New South Wales, who was taking a few months' leave from professional work to come to this country for the study of Hebridean folk-song in its native haunts. It was difficult not to envy him this busman's holiday ...

While in the Outer Isles he has gathered valuable impressions, has met many interesting personalities, and has lived for three months as a singer, talker, and listener among the people. In the course of his visit he has been in North Uist, through Harris and Lewis, has driven over the fords through Benbecula to Lochboisdale, Eriskay, and Barra, and was in North Uist again just before returning to Glasgow ...

Mr Hosking, while fully appreciating what has so far been done for Hebridean song, particularly by Mrs Kennedy Fraser—it was through her work that his interest was first aroused—believes that the general result is not quite true to the originals. And in Barra he was impressed by the number of songs he heard which the people declared had never been collected—songs with the most intricate rhythms and fascinating variety of melody. 'I am convinced,' he told me, 'that the only way such songs could be faithfully secured would be by means of careful recording strictly adhered to. The records would capture the text with the tune: and the text, say the people, must be regarded as of equal importance with the melody.'

He instanced 'Kishmul's Galley' as a good example of an 'art' song that has been evolved from the original folk-song, and supported his belief in the greater value of the true version by singing it to me with the simplicity of style and regular pulse that native singers give it. Nor is he entirely satisfied with what his friends of the Mod are doing with the native song. The Hebrideans have their own scale of values, which they preserve jealously. Mr Hosking never heard any attempt at part singing among them. Yet An Comunn Gaidhealach [The Gaelic League] are willing to sing the old tunes in plain harmony, which contrasts not favourably with the artistic results of Mrs Kennedy Fraser, and in treatment is no more true to the spirit of Hebridean song. An Comunn make their arrangements too plainly hymnlike in quality. Mr Hosking would have no arrangements of any kind and cannot feel that songs he has heard in the simple cottages of the Outer Isles are suited to a formal platform performance.

He is taking back with him about a dozen new songs, which, as far as he can learn, have never before been collected. Among his treasured memories is a sense of the indefinable charm of the Hebrides. Many people, as he was leaving for the mainland, said to him in the characteristic quiet way of the islanders, 'You'll come back.' He would like to think that some among those kindly folk are seers in the full Gaelic sense of the term."^[12]

The Glasgow Daily Record, on the other hand, advised him not to sing port a bheul ('mouth music') with a piano accompaniment.^[13] Indeed, some of the information which Hosking collected from the islanders may well have been misleading. In the appendix of songs collected in the Outer Hebrides, for example, is one called 'A Cattle Chasing Croon'.^[14] Clement Hosking was told that this was the song of a mother wanting her small boys to chase some stray cattle from the haystack; but Neil Morrison, who was brought up on North Uist, has suggested it was more likely that this song dated from the days when the Highlanders and Islanders still lived by cattle raiding, and that it was a song of triumph sung while stolen cattle were being driven home. This interpretation is suggested by the line 'Oh ho, co leis iad' ('Oh ho, who owns them'). After all, in a small island community a woman would not only have known which neighbour owned the cows that were at her haystack, but known the cows' names as well. By the time that Clement Hosking visited the island, however, the islanders had settled down to become respectable Presbyterians and put their cattle-raiding past behind them. If any of them remembered that this was the real origin of the song they may have preferred to keep quiet about it.

Hosking did not immediately return to Australia. His book *Fine Song for Singing* is vague about dates, but after the Hebrides he spent time travelling around Britain, and may even have ventured as far afield as Brittany. He gave recitals in London, Edinburgh and Glasgow. In August 1938, for his services to Celtic music, Hosking was made a bard of Gorseth Kernow ('The Gorsedd of Cornwall'), the body which acts as guardian of the Cornish language and culture. The ceremony took place in Cornwall under the leadership of Morton Nance, one of the pioneers of the Cornish language revival in the early twentieth century. The bardic name Hosking received was Kenyas an Enesow ('Singer of the Isles') and Kenyas (meaning singer) is the pen-name he used when he wrote short pieces for the Sydney newspapers.^[15]

Hosking's contribution to the Second World War effort was as honorary director of the Red Cross Concert Unit in Sydney. In 1944 he also became choirmaster of Newington College, at Enmore, a position which he held until 1961. The choir was not a voluntary one. It was composed of conscripts, who were difficult to keep in check, and so a member of the teaching staff kept order during Hosking's practices.

David Kinsela remembers Clement Hosking at this phase of his life. Kinsela came to Sydney from Young in 1958 to study at the Conservatorium when he was sixteen years old. His first paid job in Sydney was as organist at Newington College, and it involved accompanying the choir while

Clement Hosking was training it. David Kinsela's impression of Hosking was that he did not understand harmony, even though he had been classically trained and directed both choirs and quartets. This is interesting in the light of comments made by the music correspondent of the Glasgow Herald—that the Hebrideans did not use four-part harmony in their singing.

In 1941 Hosking became founder-president of the Celtic Society of Australia, a position which he held until 1965, a year before his death. The Celtic Society met every second month in the 1950s, with a performance by the Sydney Folk-Song Choir every other month.[16] In an article titled 'Bringing the Celts Together', Clement Hosking outlined a typical meeting of the Society:

"Prior to the formation of this new society there were various organisations in Australia to represent the particular interests of different Celtic races and districts. There were the Highland Societies, Burns' Clubs, Gaelic associations, Caledonian Societies, Welsh Societies, Hibernian Societies, Catholic Caledonian Associations, Devon and Cornwall Associations, and so on ... Now for the first time in this country an institution had come into existence to contain within itself people from Scotland, Wales, Ireland and Cornwall, and to give these people the opportunity to study the history, literature, art and music of all the Celtic races ... Once every year, at Christmas, the members hold a party which takes the form of a conversazione with music ... but the remaining nine meetings of the year consist of ... lectures with always a supplementary program of Celtic music ... These lectures have covered a wide field. There have been talks on 'Highland Superstitions', 'Ancient Ireland', 'Standing Stones', 'Wales', 'Ancient Irish Monuments and Their Builders', 'The Beveridge Plan compared to that of the Welsh King Howel Dha, 1042', 'Celtic Music', 'Celtic Art', 'The Celtic Revival', 'Celtic Folk-lore', 'Hebridean Song', and 'The Influence of Gaelic on English as Spoken in Ireland' ... Another lecture entitled 'Killarney, and the Ancient Kingdom of Kerry' was illustrated with nearly one hundred coloured lantern slides made especially for the occasion, and many of the lectures have been outstandingly original. One of our lecturers is a Free Presbyterian minister, two others are Roman Catholic priests, another is a Methodist minister, several are school-masters. Then there is a retired naval commander, and a Scots sea captain who gives us a lecture on such occasions as he can spare when his ship, laden with explosives, is not dodging Japanese bombs in the North ... The most vital thing which has happened, however, is that our members have come to know and understand each other. Irish members have become firm friends with Scots and Welsh members. Catholic and Protestant forget their differences in the excitement of the pursuit of a common interest ... We have come to the conclusion that the Celt of whatever country, political opinion or religion is a jolly good fellow, and we heartily recommend to fellow-Celts in lands where there is not a Celtic Society to get busy and form one." [17]

Clement Hosking was also involved with the International Folk-Music Council, and the Folklore Association, first of New South Wales, then after 1947 of Australia. He was president of this organisation from 1946 to 1965. He welcomed the arrival of immigrants with non-British backgrounds after World War II, and at one time he was vice-president of the New Australians' Cultural Association. His interest in the folklore brought to Australia by New Australians led him to write another book called *Old Tales in a New Land*, which was published in 1958. This book contained traditions and stories from twelve European countries but, in keeping with the times, neither Asian nor Aboriginal cultures were included.[18]

The book for which he is best remembered—*Fine Song For Singing*—was published in 1951. Its title comes from a line in a poem called 'Romance', by Robert Louis Stevenson:

And this shall be for music, when no one else is near,
The fine song for singing, the rare song to hear.[19]

As well as recording Hosking's reminiscences about his journey, *Fine Song for Singing* contained previously uncollected songs from the Hebrides. The book also documented Hebridean folklore, surviving beliefs of the islanders and descriptions of their way of life. In particular, *Fine Song for Singing* recorded details of the traditional 'black houses' in which the people were still living in the 1930s:

"The Hebrideans are not morbid or introspective, as some writers would have us believe. They enjoy a good time as keenly as most people and possess an exhilarating sense of humour which lifts them above what to many would be a life of considerable hardship. Though many of them to-day live in modern dwellings, until recent times their homes were primitive, but suited to the climate. Many still cling to houses of the old type, known as 'black-house' or 'round-house'. These simple old buildings are about thirty feet from end to end, with walls seldom more than five feet high or less than eight feet thick—and they never lack warmth. Within the walls is a cavity in which rests the framework of the roof. This is thatched, and often long ropes made of heather are flung across the roof and attached to large stones, to act as a further resistance to wind and weather. On this thatch at certain seasons wildflowers grow in profusion, making some of the roofs so gay as to remind one of a smart maiden's spring hat.

In the centre of the floor a peat fire burns, the smoke making its way out through the doorway or through the thatch, for there is seldom a chimney in these houses. When the roof is re-thatched the old smoke-impregnated straw provides a valuable manure.

Around the peat-fire in the long winter nights the people gather for the ceilidh—originally a gathering for story-telling only, but nowadays usually for a sing-song. Around this fire are repeated the treasured stories of the past; around it are kept alive the Hebridean songs." [20]

One story which he heard from Angus Macdonald, Hosking related at length:

"Once upon a time there was (and not so long ago at that) a family in North Uist who lived near a hill of curious shape. Near this hill was a well, and every morning and every evening the good wife would take her bucket there to draw water. One evening there was, when it was already growing dark, as she drew near the well she fancied she heard music. 'Och,' she said to herself, 'It must be a piper playing over yonder.' Yet, as she listened she thought this could never be pipe music for, though it was soft music, it was also near music, faint and eerie, coming from the hill itself. Woman as she was and curious, she put down her bucket and went forward nearer the hill to find the music. Judge of her surprise when, in the side of the hill, she saw a cave which she had never seen there before, and from the cave poured forth a stream of light and music, soft but clear. Then she paused, afraid to go further, but at last, growing ever more curious and forgetting her fear, she ventured into the cave. Louder and louder grew the music as she pressed forward into another but more spacious cave beyond, where she saw hundreds of little figures dancing to music the like of which she had never heard before, so sweet, so soft, so enticing it was. Once again fear stole over her, for she knew full well now she was in the fairies' den, and turned to flee ere she was discovered. But she had lingered too long, for now the fairies had surrounded her. Laying many tiny hands upon her, they bore her to a place where one sat who seemed to be their king. 'Woman of the mortals,' he exclaimed, 'how come you to be in the place of the Sidhe?' adding, as she tried to answer, 'None who comes to the fairy den may leave save at our pleasure. Here you must stay and act as cook for the fairy folk. When you have baked all the meal in the barley-kist you may return again to the haunts of the mortals.'

Sad at heart was the poor woman to hear these words, but when she saw how small the kist was she smiled to herself, thinking she would soon be free. But, ochone! however much of the meal she baked as much remained in the kist, and, distraught as she was with longing for her dear ones and so full of sorrow, she wept bitterly, and needed nought but her tears wherewith to mix the meal.

One day, a fairy who was helping her at her task asked the reason of her sorrow, whereupon she, through her tears, told him of her husband helpless without her, and of her two wee laddies motherless and unattended, knowing not whither she had gone. As she spoke his fairy heart was stirred in a way strange to him, for the little folk know not pity, and making sure no other fairies were nigh he told the secret of the kist. 'Every day when you have baked the meal throw back the scraps that remain into the kist.' This she did and every day less and less of the meal remained until at last there was none at all. Then did she demand to be taken before the king, who, when she told her tale smiled and said, 'Some fairy has given away our secret. None the less, the promise shall be kept. You are free to leave the fairy den, but ere you go I will give you the fairy gift. In future you and yours will be able to do twice as much as any other mortal, and this without growing weary.'

Then the fairies led the happy woman from the presence of the king back whence she had come; but when, under the open sky, she turned to say 'Farewell', sure there were no fairies there nor no longer a cave in the hill!

'Was it asleep or dreaming I was?' she wondered. 'Was the music I heard but my foolish fancy?' There was her bucket where she had left it, so picking it up and filling it at the well the bewildered woman made her way homeward.

No change there was in her cottage without, but within was a man strange to her and two braw youths. These were never her husband and her wee laddies!

Little had she known that nine long years had passed since that evening when she had left her bucket by the hill. These were indeed her kin and they told her how they had sought for her in vain, but, seeing the bucket, had left it where they had found it hoping that some day she would bear it home again. They marvelled to hear all that had befallen her and at the gift bestowed on them by the fairy king." [21]

Hosking wrote that although some may find such a story fanciful, there was evidence to the contrary. Miss Jeannie Ranken of Sydney spent some time in the Isle of Lewis. She also went to Edinburgh with a Hebridean friend to see the first performance there of Barrie's 'Mary Rose'. Neither of them knew anything about the plot and, having arrived late, they had no time to glance at the programme. During the second act Miss Ranken noticed her friend becoming so hysterical that she had to be led sobbing into the foyer. There, in broken words, she said that had she known the nature of the play she would never have come; years before, her sister was supposed to have been stolen by the fairies and had never returned! [22]

Few people who met Clement Hosking after he withdrew from the Liberal Catholic Church in the 1930s ever knew that he had once been a priest in that church. Hosking's involvement with the Theosophical Society lapsed after the nineteen thirties, but he joined and remained a member of the Buddhist Society of New South Wales until the mid-sixties. [23] When he died of myocardial infarction on 9 October 1966 he was cremated with Buddhist rites. A memorial and thanksgiving service was also held for him in the chapel of Newington College.

His personal qualities impressed everyone who came into contact with him. Lucy Gartrell, bursar of Newington College in the 1950s, said that she looked back on her talks with him with absolute pride; whilst Marie Heald, who is now eighty-five years old and can remember Clement Hosking when he was priest in charge of the Liberal Catholic Church at Chatswood, describes him as 'a delightful person, a wonderful smile and used to chuckle, tall, but not skinny'. [24]

Hosking may have won a certain amount of fame in this world, but his success never led to great fortune. He lived for many years as a lodger in the home of the Dunster sisters at Killara and then up to his death in an aged care unit run by the Methodist Church at Leichardt. [25] As a memorial to

him, the Celtic Society and the Folklore Association endowed Clement Hosking annual awards for Celtic and Hebridean folk-singing at the City of Sydney Eisteddfod. These awards unfortunately have lapsed due to lack of funds.

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- [8] Hosking, Fine Song for Singing, p. 18. See also Clement Hosking, Three Hebridean Songs, (Sydney: Palings, 1953).
- [9] Clement Hosking, 'Folk Music', Education Gazette, May 1945.
- [10] Bulletin, 16 March 1935, p. 35.
- [11] Letters and press cuttings, Hosking Scrapbook, NLA MS 2680.
- [12] Glasgow Herald, Monday, 3 January 1938.
- [13] Glasgow Daily Record, Wednesday, 9 February 1938.
- [14] Hosking, Fine Song for Singing, p. 208.
- [15] A rather garbled account of this was published in the Bulletin in 1945. The journalist assumed that it was the Welsh Gorsedd, the body that controls the National Eisteddfod of Wales, into which Clement Hosking had been received, but Ann Jenner, the archivist of Gorseth Kernow, assured me that it was in fact the Cornish equivalent that had made him a bard. See the Bulletin, 10 October 1945, p. 6.
- [16] I am grateful to Flora Macleod for this information.
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- [22] Hosking, Fine Song for Singing, pp. 22–23.
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- [24] She also says that during this period of his life Hosking was engaged to Florence Beaufoy, who lived at the Manor at Castlecrag, but the marriage never took place.
- [25] I am grateful to Lucy Gartrell for this information.