

**Paddy Tutty, *The Last Holdout***, Prairie Druid Music 2013; <http://www.prairiedruid.net>

Paddy Tutty has been singing and recording traditional ballads since the 1970s. Her previous five albums, the earliest produced in the good old days of vinyl and cassette, have received wide acclaim from ballad collectors, magazines and folk music radio stations around the world. It has been a long 13 years since her last recording, but she has made it worth the wait.

Just to show she still means business, the CD opens with a 6 ½ minute ballad from the Child collection – ‘Kemp Owyne’, Child #34. Kemp Owyne isn’t the longest track recorded. That honour goes to ‘The Famous Flower of Serving Men’, Child # 106; a ballad enhanced and reworked by Martin Carthy. Both of these epic story songs involve magic and the supernatural, and (coincidentally?) feature an evil mother-figure. These are the only Child ballads on the recording, and have been sung by Paddy for decades, though she hasn’t recorded them until now.

For those unfamiliar with her style, Paddy’s singing is genuine and unvarnished and is never at odds with the spirit of the stories she sings. Some songs are sung a capella; others with the wholesome strumming of an Appalachian dulcimer or guitar, or the chording of an Anglo concertina for accompaniment. As a balladeer, she is very like Margaret McArthur, a much missed singer and dulcimer player from the USA, who is one of Paddy’s many sources of material. Speaking of sources, Paddy has always been conscientious about honouring hers, both in performances and on her recordings. Her influences are as varied as her material. On this CD, Paddy honours England’s Martin Carthy and Vermont’s Margaret McArthur, as well as Hedy West (US), Brian Peters (UK), Pete Bellamy (UK), Peta Webb (UK), Harry Tuft (US), Jim Boyes (UK), and Norm Walker (Canada).

Sometimes I come across a ballad, or a particular rendition of one, that cuts through all the outer layers and aims straight for the heart. There is one such on this CD. ‘Llewelyn and Celert’ is an ancient Welsh story put to lyric form and music by fellow Saskatchewanite, Norm Walker. It is an excellent modern ballad, and I appreciated his version, recorded on his first album “Time-Tested Tales, Tall and True”. Paddy has sung and recorded many of Norm’s songs over the years, but she does this one so well, I wonder if it were not written with her in mind. Perhaps it is because Paddy is a specialist in singing ballads, but in her expert balladeer voice, this moving story of a heroic dog jumps out and grabs me in a way the original recorded version didn’t. I am reduced to weeping each time I listen to it.

There is somewhat of a natural theme in the pieces selected for this album, in keeping with Paddy’s “Prairie Druid” roots. Every season is represented. ‘Bringing in the Sheaves’ by Jim Boyes uses the image of an autumn ritual to tell of life’s inter-connectedness. ‘The Griesly Bride’, an Australian poem of a supernatural transformation, uses winter scenery to enhance the telling of its haunting tale. ‘The Flower Carol’, set to music by Paddy, celebrates new life in spring. And ‘Oak, Ash and Thorn’, a Kipling poem set to music by Pete Bellamy, joins Norm Walker’s ‘Summer Solstice’ in commemorating the summer season from a Pagan perspective.

There are a few instrumental tracks interspersed with the songs and ballads. The title track, ‘The Last Holdout’, is her own composition played on an exquisitely toned Sawchyn guitar. In her notes, Paddy explains that the tune was written “in honour of those beautifully stubborn people who treasure their traditions in the pace of progress...” This could be a description of Paddy herself. In this day and age, where becoming a singer/songwriter is endorsed by the music industry as the first, and sometimes only, recognized step in a folk musician’s career, ballad singing is at times a lonely specialty. There are regrettably few who, like Paddy, have made it a life’s calling. It is to be applauded, therefore, when those ‘beautifully stubborn’ traditional folk singers make their material available for future generations. A holdout Paddy may well be, but surely not the last.