The Piper’s House
Taigh a’ Phìobaire.

The music of the Mackays of Raasay lies at the heart of Scotland’s piping tradition although our conventional wisdom tends not to engage further with issues such as the origins of the Mackays or the Hebridean context, cultural and social, in which they lived. With these and other questions in mind, piping scholars, Professor Hugh Cheape and Dr Decker Forrest, both programme leaders at Scotland’s Gaelic college, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig in Skye, travelled to Raasay and began researching the rich and often underappreciated piping heritage of the Mackays of Raasay.

Most players of the Great Highland Bagpipe will come to recognise a significant list of place names that are associated, in one way or other, with pipe music. Names such as Anapool, Borerraig, Gairloch, Chillas-cie, Kilberry and so on, creep into our vocabulary but rarely do we give them much thought beyond, typically, their appearance in tune titles. One of the best examples of this is the Island of Raasay, located between the Isle of Skye and the Applecross Peninsula on the mainland of Wester Ross. Most pipers can play the reel, Mrs MacLeod of Raasay, and those familiar with ceòl mòr will have heard of MacLeod of Raasay’s Salute and John Garbh MacLeod of Raasay’s Salute and few can fail to have heard of the celebrated ‘Mackays of Raasay’, of whom John and his son Angus are still hugely important to the history of bagpipe music.

For most of us, John Mackay is known for having passed his settings of ceòl mòr on to his son Angus, who subsequently notated and published some in 1838 and recorded others in manuscript. We are told, therefore, that Angus provides pipers today with a critically important link, that is, between the modern era of notation-led transmission and the older, exclusively aural tradition of ceòl mòr extending back through his father to the illustrious MacCrimmons of Borerraig. Sadly, the only other point known to pipers about Angus is of the ‘Madness of Angus Mackay’ and of his tragic demise, when, towards the end of his career he succumbed to mental illness and is believed to have drowned in the River Nith while trying to escape from a sanatorium in Dumfries.

Some 150 years after Angus’s death, it is timely for the received conventional wisdom of the Mackays of Raasay to be reappraised. In particular, what can be learned by examining the Mackays’ musical tradition within the social and cultural framework of Raasay during the late-18th and early-19th centuries? Does the notion of the Mackays being principle tradition bearers to the MacCrimmons of Borerraig belie a more complex and discrete piping heritage of the Mackays themselves? Has the Mackays’ influence on ceòl mòr overshadowed an equally important contribution to ceòl beag?

These and other questions took the authors to the Island of Raasay to discover and recover something of the celebrated family’s piping heritage. The first discovery was a small memorial plaque commemorating John Mackay, father of Angus Mackay. The brief text engraved on the plaque, given in both Gaelic and English, represents in essence the conventional wisdom for a key moment in the received history of the Great Highland Bagpipe and its music. The English text reads:

This plaque commemorates John Mackay of Raasay 1767-1848. The last great piper to have had lessons from the MacCrimmons. He was the best player, composer and teacher of his day, and through his expert pupils – John Bàn MacKenzie, Angus Macpherson, Donald Cameron and his own four sons – the playing of the great music was carried forward faithfully to all the top pipers of the present time.
The plaque and its fixing on the stone is the initiative of the Raasay Heritage Trust, *Urras Dualchas Ratharsaidh*, as a notable Raasay man, Farquhar MacLennan, has written, ‘as part of its endeavour to maintain and enhance the rich diversity of these islands in a social and cultural context’. The Heritage Trust’s purpose is to offer the visitor to the island more of the island’s history and an enhanced ‘visitor experience’. Such initiatives also serve to remind the island community about Raasay’s history, when today’s community is now reinforced with incomers. As the last tradition-bearers will say: ‘everything went with the people’, following the beginnings of the savage clearance of Raasay after 1846 when the long-standing proprietors, the MacLeods of Raasay, sold the island and emigrated to Australia. In this and other ways such as ‘heritage trails’ and publications reflecting their stewardship and preservation of the history of Raasay, the Heritage Trust reminds the population about Raasay’s past and helps to strengthen memory and identity.

Without prior knowledge of its existence, we chanced on the stone at Kilmoluag, on a first visit to Raasay in July 2009. We knew from the literature that John Mackay of Raasay was born and lived in Eyre, or *Oighre*, as it is referred to in Raasay itself. Oighre and Gleannan Oighre is at the southern end of Raasay, but, on a first visit there to locate the piper’s house, there was no sign of where the Mackay home might have been and, more significantly perhaps, not a soul who might be able to point it out. Had the knowledge been lost of the birthplace of one of Scotland’s greatest piping families, and the intimate association of person and place elided to a vague and superficial detail only that the Mackay pipers belonged to Raasay and were born and raised there? Not so, we subsequently learnt from Rebecca Mackay of Osgaig, Island of Raasay. Rebecca is married to Calum Don Mackay who is descended from *Dòmhnall Ruairidh*, or *Dòmhnall Mac a’Phìobaire*, the brother of John Mackay. Rebecca
knows the house in Oighre where John Mackay lived and raised his family. It is still known to Raasay folk as ‘The Piper’s House’ — Taigh a’ Phìobaire — and Tobhta Taigh a’ Phìobaire, the word tobhta telling us that the house is now roofless and uninhabited.

Rebecca Mackay says that it is island tradition that John Mackay was buried at the west end of the chapel of Saint Moluag, in the spot marked by the stone. The stone itself, as we see it now, was brought from Oighre recently by Calum Don Mackay, a Trustee of the Heritage Trust. It was placed in position between Mackay graves and the plaque inscribed using a text in English provided by Seumas MacNeill and translated into Gaelic by Farquhar MacLennan. This mark of ‘memory’ and ‘identity’ which does honour to the history of piping is one which we can all applaud. A further piece of information was of different but great value for piping history; Rebecca Mackay is of the firm belief that the Raasay Mackay family is descended from the Mackays of Gairloch and that they are related to John Mackay, Am Pìobaire Dall. The Raasay Mackays are known as Clann Mhic Ruairidh and she quotes the family naming pattern of patronyms of ‘Angus, son of John, son of Roderick’ — Aonghas Mac Iain Mhic Ruairidh — as significant corroborative detail, aligning the family with the same naming pattern as the Gairloch Mackays.

With Rebecca’s guidance, we found the house in Oighre on a day of brilliant sunshine in June this year. Though indeed now roofless, the Piper’s House is a very impressive structure, orientated with its front elevation facing approximately south-east and presenting a solid gable to the prevailing wind. The building whose dry-stone wall construction still stands to eave height is long — over 50 feet long and one room wide — a little under 18 feet across. The internal space is divided into two by a stone partition wall. There is an entrance door towards the lower end of the house and two (or possibly three) windows on the front wall. The house sits prominently in the middle of a shallow valley on an elevated plain, about 250 feet above sea level. It is a very good example of the building which architectural historians call a ‘longhouse’ or ‘byre-dwelling’.

The ‘longhouse’ can be defined as a building which combines accommodation for people and cattle, especially cows and their calves, under one roof with intercommunication between the two spaces. Such a building belonged to a cattle economy where cows were kept in the dwelling-house and benefited from the warmth and shelter of the house; they would be foddered with grass, hay and straw, and, with the cows inside, it ensured some milk supply through the winter months when adequate nourishment was in short supply. With the cattle bedded on straw, bracken, heather or turf, a further function of the byre-dwelling was the conservation of their manure to be used on the cultivated ground in spring. The custom of keeping cows within the dwelling-house was a universal practice in Northern Europe, and it is clear from the evidence that the longhouse was the primary form of dwelling throughout Scotland before the agricultural improvements of the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As such, it...
survived into recent times in the Northern and Western Isles and on the northern mainland, and the remains of longhouse structures can be seen in these areas. With its thatched roof, it is sometimes misleadingly referred to as a ‘black house’ but this term was unknown in the past and leaves us with no impression of the status and function of these buildings.

Local tradition which refers to the house as *Tàigh a’ Phìobaire* also describes the builder of the house (as we see it today) as Donald Macfarlane MacLeod, born in Rona about 1901. He had been named after the first Free Presbyterian minister in Raasay, Donald Macfarlane, and may have been an elder of the kirk. The house was then used as religious meeting house and was large enough to accommodate a small congregation of local folk for worship or a class for lessons or bible class. He would hold services in the house when the Oighre folk could not get to church. It is assumed that there was an earlier house here which was the dwelling of John Mackay of Raasay and his family. The significance of the structure as we see it, however, is that it occupies the exact ‘footprint’ of John Mackay’s house and incorporates much of the earlier structure. This is therefore a rare and significant survival and still has much to tell about the Piper and his life.
Features of an earlier house seem to be embedded in the structure and are evident still. This was originally, as we have described, a longhouse ‘byre-dwelling’ constructed on a linear plan on a slight slope with the cattle-byre accessed at the door. In this lower end of the house, there is a drain hole at low ground-level beside a fireplace and chimney flue. The fireplace and chimney look as if they have been added at a later date and have changed the function of this space from cattle to human accommodation. This hole in the gable would, speculatively, have been the exit-point of an open gutter or drain running down the length of the byre area and carrying away the urine of the tethered animals. In other circumstances, a drain hole would be an unusual or unexpected feature in a living room and, doubtless, this part of the building would be referred to as ceann shìos an taighe (‘the lower end of the house’).

The living space of room with fireplace, now accessed directly by the door, has probably replaced the earlier living space, now behind the substantial partition wall of stone. There is a tell-tale stone slab and step up to pass into this inner room, a sort of verge which once served to divide the living area from the byre area. This inner room was originally the ‘fire-room’ or living space with fireplace. At this date of the late-18th or early-19th centuries, a central hearth or fire in the middle of the room was the norm; this was (and still is) referred to as ceann shuas an taighe (‘the upper end of the house’).

Another small but telling detail, evident in the main room with chimney piece, is that there is a ‘winnowing hole’ or toll fhasgnaidh in the back wall, more or less opposite the main door. There are substantial stone ‘footings’ in the wall or foundation course of the house and there is clearly a gap at this point. In the earlier phase of the house, this allowed for a through draught across the building and aided the task of sieving or winnowing grain to separate it from stalks and husks.

The Piper’s House adjoins an area enclosed by a stone wall. This would have been a kailyard and arable ground for a crop of oats, potatoes and perhaps flax, and might have included a stackyard or inndhann. There is some evidence on the ground for other areas of ploughed and cultivated ground where crops of ‘bere’ or barley and oats were grown. Cattle, sheep and horses were kept away from growing crops (which were not fenced as we would expect to see them) by being herded on grazing areas. This was the daily task of herdsmen and children, just as Angus Mackay described his father, John, doing while he practiced on his homemade chanter: ‘my father used to … pick up his lesson and play the same on the moor while herding … on a feadan teileadair’ (i.e. on a chanter made of the stalk of an iris). Importantly too, there is evidence for other dwelling-houses and enclosures in the vicinity, but not in a linear formation such as characterises the ‘crofting township’ of today. These amount to an older form of ‘township’ which was the primary division of land and essential social grouping.

The community of Oighre was a ‘joint-tenancy farm’, held from and paying rent to MacLeod of Oighre who, as the ‘Tacksman’, held the land from MacLeod of Raasay.

There is a dearth of written records to explain these features. We know from Census Records (and his own statement of his age) that John Mackay was probably born in 1767 and that he won the Highland Society of London competition in 1792 when he was piper to James Macleod of Oighre. Between then and 1823, he raised a family in Oighre of nine children, one of whom died in infancy. His son Angus wrote a biographical note on his father and family and described a special relationship with the Tacksman, Malcolm MacLeod of Oighre, who had
also taught the young John piping. His status as piper probably ensured his tenancy of house and land in Oighre, as well as some freedom from paying rent, though such advantages had barely outlived the period of traditional clanship.

From one or two sources, we can reconstruct the environment of music and song in the Piper's House where John Mackay and his wife, Margaret Maclean — Mairearad nighean Aonghais — nourished a large family and taught their four sons piping. Angus Mackay's own manuscript collection includes cèil mòr and cèil beag, and his later transcript, now labelled the 'Seaforth Manuscript', included music noted, as he described it, from his father's canntaireachd. Angus's published Collection of Ancient Piobaireachd of 1838 includes Raasay and Skye music. More importantly, the survival of the music manuscript of Eliza Ross, granddaughter of John MacLeod of Raasay and niece of his successor, James MacLeod of Raasay, the patrons of John Mackay, gives us a near unique insight into music-making in the 'big house' of Raasay around the time of Angus Mackay's birth in 1812. The so-called 'Lady D'Oyly Manuscript', taking its title from Eliza Ross's married name, includes song airs, dance tunes and six pieces of piobaireachd. We know that the cèil mòr and some of the cèil beag and dance tunes drew on the piping of John Mackay of Oighre and take us to music-making in the Piper's House of Raasay.

[To be continued in the next issue of Piping Today]

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Further reading
Campbell, Archibald, 'The History and Art of Angus Mackay', in Piping Times 2 Numbers 5-7 (1949-1950).