



Ben Miller is a recent graduate of the music programme at Saint Michael's College in Burlington, Vermont, where he also received the award of Outstanding Fine Arts Major in Music for the class of 2011. During his studies he focused primarily on bagpipe performance, music theory, and musicology, with a heavy interest in folk traditions. He is currently studying for a masters degree in Highland Studies at the University of Edinburgh.

Evolution of the Highland Bagpipe within the Musical Traditions of Scotland and Cape Breton

THESIS — CHAPTER THREE SUMMARY — PART I — EVOLUTION AFTER SEPARATION

3.1 In Scotland

Post-Culloden Culture

WHILE it has been suggested that the laws stemming from the English victory at Culloden may have had less effect on the lifestyle of Highland Gaels than originally imagined (See article featured in *Piping Today* issue 55), dramatic social, religious and economic changes in the early 19th century, culminating with the Highland Clearances, would leave Gaelic society in the West Highlands and Islands a shadow of its former self.

There were many internal factors that would come to wear down Gaelic culture in the remaining population, perhaps the largest of which was the vast amount of these communities that uprooted to resettle in Eastern Canada, the United States and Australasia. While there may not be any concise documentation of the total number of Gaels who left Scotland, it is easy to understand the extent to which these emigrations affected the Scottish Highlands. With tens of thousands of immigrants settling in Nova Scotia alone, the total figures for 19th century immigrations to the New World are almost unimaginable. This factor has been lamented by many and directly linked to the decline of traditional Gaelic culture. Nova Scotian piper and musicologist Barry Shears notes in his book, *Dance to the Piper*: “There is little doubt that this ‘brain drain’ of talent was one of the main causes for the eventual decline of ‘traditional’ bagpipe music in Scotland.”

Many Gaels who did not voluntarily leave the country were forced out of the Highlands by their landlords, who Shears suggests, had become “increasingly anglicised” and profit-driven. With prices pushed above the level of affordability for many families, those who could not pay to emigrate had little choice but

to move, either to less workable land on the coast, or often to large cities. Gaelic language and tradition would have little or no place in these new locations and would be left behind by generations to come. Such relocations are surely responsible for the assimilation of many Gaels into more modern Anglo-Scottish society.

If the effects of the Clearances were not staggering enough, new social factors would soon add to the impetus for change in the struggling Highland communities. Among the myriad of cultural changes at work in the 19th century, shifts in religion and education would come to the forefront as forces of change targeted at Gaelic life.

In religion, the agent of change took form as a new wave of evangelical Protestantism, with harsh critiques of traditional music and dance. Remaining Catholic parishes in the Highlands

evangelical leanings sometime before leaving Scotland. After emigrating he gave up playing the pipes stating that it “tended to lead him into temptation”. Although no longer playing, Angus refused to sell or give away his once prized pipes. He instead tied a stone to them and threw them into a lake where they would tempt no one.

In education, dramatic changes were brought on by the Education Act of 1872, which established compulsory elementary school attendance throughout Scotland. Under this act, Gaelic was replaced, setting English as the standard for future education. This programme would systematically bring on the decline of the Gaelic language in the years to come.

No scholar has focused more on the connection between piping and the Gaelic language than Allan MacDonald, whose MLitt thesis,

‘With an emphasis put on ‘folk’ life and culture, all things ‘Highland’ came into vogue. This proved especially true in the creation of the ‘Highland Societies’ of both London and Scotland’

maintained a conservative backing for traditional Gaelic culture, while the fissure of the Protestant Church of Scotland and the creation of the Free Church of Scotland brought increasingly radical teachings in many protestant areas. Period accounts note that gatherings and ceilidhs, once popular in Gaelic society, were now infrequent and had shifted focus from music and poetry to discussions of politics or religion.

An early example of this new attitude can be seen in Shears’ account of Angus Morrison, a second tier immigrant to Cape Breton landing in the 1820s. While he was once a highly successful piper, he is said to have adopted more

The Relationship between Pibroch and Gaelic Song, explores the divorce of the Gaelic song-air tradition from a parallel piece of the piping tradition known as *pibroch*. Commenting on elements of an aural tradition, in chapter two of his thesis he writes: “For any society’s traditional music to be properly appreciated by its people, it is surely an elementary condition that the music contains similar rhythmic features which are present in the language of that society.”

A good analogy to this phenomenon, as discussed in MacDonald’s examination of the *pibroch* tradition, would be the exportation of

Circa 1808: George Clarke, a piper of the 71st, carrying the delineated silver pipes he was awarded by the Highland Society for his brave conduct at the Battle of Veimeria on 21st August, 1808. He continued to play his instrument to rouse his comrades, despite being severely wounded. 'The Highland Piper, George Clarke', engraved by Rosenburgh.



THE HIGHLAND PIPER, GEORGE CLARKE.

American karaoke to many foreign markets. In 19th century Scotland and in this more modern example, music that is transplanted into a new linguistic field often loses an expressive element rooted in the understanding of the culture and language that created it.

With music, language, and dance, three vital and inseparable elements of traditional Gaelic music, all under simultaneous attack, it is not surprising that a significant decline in the tradition would occur during this period. Change in any one of these elements could have easily had

severe consequences for the rest of the tradition. In this case, all three of these elements were challenged, leaving traditional Gaelic culture pushed to the remote fringes of society.

The Victorian Era

DURING the late 18th and early 19th centuries, a sense of nationalistic romanticism began entering the British consciousness. There, with an emphasis put on 'folk' life and culture, all things 'Highland' came into vogue. This proved especially true in the creation of the 'Highland

Societies' of both London and Scotland. These two entities, perhaps more than any other lone factor, were instrumental in creating the romantic model of the archetypal Highlander that exists to this date.

Founded in the spring of 1778, the Highland Society of London was comprised of a group of 25 Scottish expatriates living in London. This grew into a highly exclusive club patronised by the upper crust of society, including parliamentarians and those who owned land in Scotland. The clout wielded by this organisation was great enough to bring about the repeal of the infamous *Scottish Dress and Disarming Acts* by 1782. The Highland Society of Scotland was incorporated as a sister organisation in 1784. While the Society's goals were numerous and varied in nature, the first three are of special interest in this case:

1. The restoration of Highland Dress
2. The preservation of the Ancient Music of the Highlands
3. The cultivation of Gaelic and the rescuing of the valuable remains of Celtic Literature

While these goals were perhaps conceived with the best of intentions, in practice, their application of quintessentially Victorian cultural values to their perception of a 'once great tradition' was often more improvisatory than preservative.

The most critical of the Societies' initiatives was their invention of the piping competition. Evolving quickly from its humble beginnings in 1781 with 13 pipers, an inaugural poetic recitation and a small panel of judges; the event came to include a large audience and churchyard processional, with the later additions of props, lights, orchestral bands, and choreographed dances. This competition sphere quickly came to represent something completely separate from any piping tradition seen in traditional Gaelic society. Hugh Cheape notes in his definitive book, *Bagpipes: a National Collection of a National Instrument*: "More and more emphasis was put on outward appearances, the splendour and glamour of Highland dress, then developing dramatic new fashionable formats, and with an increased military emphasis emerging during and after the Napoleonic Wars. Bagpipe music would be customarily characterised as 'martial strains', the piper becoming a stereotype, conforming, especially by the 1820s,

to public expectations of what a Highlander should look like.”

As Cheape suggests, these popular expectations, supplemented by the work of visionary authors such as Sir Walter Scott, have shaped modern perceptions of Gaelic Scottish society and music more than any historical basis or fact ever would. As a prime example, there is a vast amount of literature available to demonstrate the invention and institutionalisation of the modern kilt as *de facto* period dress in Gaelic society, such as Cheape’s *Tartan: The Highland Habit*. Many similar re-interpretations of Gaelic culture can be seen in the realm of Highland music and dance as they came into fashion within Victorian society.

These competitions became increasingly more structured and the technical requirements for contending musicians also had to change. Standardised settings were one of the first and most obvious requirements that needed to be implemented. In the early days of the competitions, the music being played was taken by a player’s whim from the completely aural tradition they were part of. With the exception of Patrick MacDonald’s informal collection of *Highland Vocal Airs*, there would be no published collections of bagpipe music until the 19th century. Even early 19th century collections offered little in the way of congruity or standardisation and many times were written to demonstrate an individual’s own personal settings, many times of the same tunes featured in preceding collections. The actual effect that these collections would have had in early competitions is also highly debatable considering that the earliest competitors would have been completely musically illiterate.

Despite inherent obstacles, standardisation was actively promoted by the Highland Societies’ (hereafter referred to as HSL or HSS) competitions. Yet another modern piper/musicologist, John Gibson cites in his book, *Traditional Gaelic Bagpiping*, 19th century piper and music publisher, Angus MacKay, who noted that the Society often awarded cash prizes for the transcription of pipe music. Gibson further explains how much this offends a traditionally Gaelic sense of the piping tradition, writing: “These facts strongly indicate a deliberate educational agenda on the part of the Highland Society of London [...] quite out of keeping with tradition and carelessly or deliberately divergent from it.”

Gibson is pointing out the inherent expressive, interpretive and free flowing nature that exists, to some extent, in any culture where tunes are learned aurally, by ear and imitation. To have these tunes codified and standardised, many times by people wholly removed from the Gaelic culture that created them, was in many ways a killing blow to whatever advantage piping competitions could have offered to support traditional Gaelic culture. A similar sentiment was shared by Allan MacDonald in a lecture given during the 2010 Celtic Colours

drummers that played whenever the Highland units were used in a ceremonial setting. Within the new setting of the ‘pipe band’, there was a need for standardisation of repertoire and instrument that was not present during the solitary piper’s duty as the rallying cry for troops in battle. The need for instruments would be met on a large scale by various firms such as the Glens, established in Edinburgh, and William Gunn in Glasgow. The music would eventually be codified in collections made specifically for military units such as the *Seaforth*, *Cabar Feidh*

‘Tunes originating from the earlier dance-music idiom became more heavily embellished and consequently were played slower to accommodate these new ornaments’

Festival in Cape Breton. Lamenting this very sort of standardisation, he said: “This music has become frozen, like a camera shot. And as one of the great early collectors of border songs, James Hogg he was called (known as the ‘ethnic shepherd’), collected Border ballads and as he was writing them down, his mother turned to him and said, ‘What are you doing?’ He said, ‘I’m writing down the songs.’ ‘That’s the end of the song,’ she said. It’s finished. It’s now set in stone. So we [now] have this concept in piping that once it’s written down, you follow the text and that whole extemporaneous nature goes [away].”

As with Gibson’s commentary, MacDonald acknowledges that something vital is lost when a previously oral tradition is adapted to written text or music. In this new competitive ideal, variations died and subtle nuances in performance that go beyond the written score were left behind, in favour of a ‘cookie-cutter’ performance of a regulated setting.

Standardisation would come into full force after the invention of military pipe bands in the mid-19th century. These units were officially established in 1854, by order of the British War Office, providing six pipers for each of the Highland regiments. This format expanded to become the Scots Guards units two years later. In this context, based on the earlier model of British fife and drum corps, the previous role of the clan-piper, as a source of martial inspiration, was morphed into a band of pipers and

and *Scots Guards* collections, still in publication today.

A secondary and likely less intended effect of the rising competition circuit was the gradual evolution of Highland pipe music, within its new setting, into something more closely resembling ‘art-music’. Between the middle of the 19th century and the turn of the 20th, the modern military/competition-focused style of playing was coming to fruition. Tunes originating from the earlier dance-music idiom became more heavily embellished and consequently were played slower to accommodate these new ornaments. When these tunes were slowed, there became an increased need to incorporate stronger rhythmic accents, which are now so typical of the present tradition (i.e. the pointed style discussed in the second feature of this series).

At the same time these aesthetic changes were occurring, tunes were also gradually being elongated, with the incorporation of additional and more complicated parts. While most early tunes featured only two ‘strains’ or ‘parts’ (i.e. AABB rondo form), many were expanded to include three by the mid-1800s, and up to six parts by the beginning of the 20th century as discussed in Roderick Cannon’s book, *The Highland Bagpipe and its Music*. In an interesting anecdote, Cannon notes the evolution of the popular strathspey, *Armistion Castle*, which began as a two-parted tune, now featured as the current third and fourth parts of the larger, expanded

version. The modern first and second parts were formerly a separate tune, known as *J.D.K. MacCallum's Strathspey*. They were combined over the course of two decades and became standardised as the modern version of *Arniston Castle* in 1899. The current competition standard is four parts for any march, strathspey, or reel.

The fundamental reason for these changes was the competitive atmosphere and the growing focus on difficulty, rather than the original rhythms of the older dance-music tradition. John Gibson in his book comments on the peculiarity of this situation in which competitors play “marches to which the soldier does not march, and dance tunes to which the dancer does not dance”. Cannon corroborates this, noting that even in competition marches, which retain perhaps the most unadulterated rhythms of the three; “the piper does not so much ‘march’ around the platform, as stalk around in a stilted manner, sometime with an up-or-down motion exaggerated to the point of parody”. Through this competition ideal, these marches, as with strathspeys, reels, and jigs, have grown to represent ‘art’ more than the original purposes they served in Gaelic Highland society.

MUSICAL EXAMPLES

THESE dramatic structural changes can be tracked over a gradual evolution seen in the settings featured in a progression of written collections. Collections written as late as the middle of the 19th century often feature arrangements much more reminiscent of dance-music than modern competition settings. In the not so distant past, there were even competitive pipers whose performance style represented a legacy that indicated much the same. Cannon, who has been a major reference throughout this paper, gives firsthand testimony about his own teachers who played marches in a more functional style, as taught by their predecessors, dating back to the 1900s. Cannon characterises their playing as “faster” with “fairly even semiquavers” and states that this appears to have been the norm during earlier periods. He also notes that when an uncle of his came back from a stint piping with the army in the beginning of the 20th century, he brought back a new style that was “slower and more pointed”. All of these changes can be witnessed through the printed scores beginning in the latter half of the 19th century.

The starting points for this analysis are two of the most widely published collections from this time period, William Gunn's *Caledonian Repository* (1848), and Angus MacKay's *Piper's Assistant* (1843). Both of these collections feature tunes set in a very similar manner to what is perhaps the closest written record of the Gaelic dance-music tradition – modern collections published in Cape Breton, often based on the playing of 20th century pipers and fiddlers. In both Gunn and MacKay's works, tunes are generally written with even divisions of the beat (rounded), with minimal ornamentation, focused on emphasising a fluid rhythm, rather than difficulty. Two examples featured in both collections are the reels *Cabar Feidh* and *Thomson's Dirk*. This latter tune's English title is listed as *Frazer's Rant* in MacKay's collection, but the Gaelic title, *Tha Biodag Air Mac Thòmais*, and the basic melody are the same in both. Settings of these tunes are included here:

Cabar Feidh

Trad. Scotland
Arr. William Gunn

(Gunn, 24)

Cabar Feidh

Trad. Scotland
Arr. Angus MacKay

(MacKay 11)

Thomson's Dirk

Tha Biodag Air Mac Thòmais

Trad. Scotland
Arr. William Gunn

(Gunn, 57)

Thomson's Dirk ("Frazer's Rant")

Tha Biodag Air Mac Thòmais

Trad. Scotland
Arr. Angus MacKay

(MacKay 24)

Cabar Feidh should be familiar, as it was presented in current Scottish and Cape Breton settings in an earlier feature. The similarities between the settings featured here and the Cape Breton settings are uncanny. There has been substantial debate in the piping community over whether these early scores were actually played as written or if they were written rounded because of convenience, while the actual rhythms were simply ‘known’ to all pipers – that is, pointed in the competition manner. This argument seems fundamentally flawed when the presence of written dots and cuts are found sporadically throughout the collections. One such example can be found in fourth bar of Gunn’s setting of *Cabar Feidh* and are seen throughout the collection. If rhythmic accents were left out for convenience and were actually used in some universal pattern, why were instances such as this included? It can only be assumed that they were played relatively round unless notated otherwise, as seen here. Cannon suggests as much in his discussion of similar collections.

The scores present a stark contrast with their modern day equivalents that have been updated with much heavier ornamentation and the substantial pointing now characteristic of completion reel playing. Two modern Scottish settings have been reprinted here.

Note in particular, the ornamentation added to the first beat of bars 17 and 21 and the heavy off-beat ornaments in bars such as 7 and 17 of *Cabar Feidh*. Also note the consistent ‘dot-cut-dot-cut’ rhythms present throughout. Inherently less natural, are the cut-dot-cut-dot rhythms found in this setting of *Thomson’s Dirk*. It is widely accepted that grace noting has grown more and more complicated since the beginning of the competition era, but the effects of such changes are seldom discussed. The additions make this setting difficult to play at full dancing speed and alter the rhythm of the tune, making it nearly unrecognizable in the dance-piping idiom.

Cultural Aftermath

THE romantic Victorian era interest with all things Scottish would not last forever, and eventually Gaelic music would fall out of favour with the gentry. While the impetus for many of the aesthetic changes discussed above may have receded, the ‘new traditions’ that were fostered in an effort to preserve some misconception of the ancient were now deeply ingrained in the

Cabar Feidh

Trad. Scotland / Arr. Queen’s Own Highlanders

Thomson's Dirk

Trad. Scotland / Arr. Scots Guards

minds of a new generation of tradition bearers. By the 20th century, few pipers or dancers had grown up in any type of aural tradition, for they were now immersed in new formalised schools of thought. From here, their new style was held as the historical norm, thanks largely to the revisionist literary imagination of authors such as Sir Walter Scott. Many pipers looked down on the playing of the few remaining dance-style pipers, deeming them 'tinkerers'. This derogatory term was often applied to anyone who did not play in the modern competition style.

Similar sentiments are reflected in the dance tradition as espoused by the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society. Dr. Margaret Bennett has written extensively on the evolution of Scottish dance during this period, and notes in her essay, *Step-dancing: Why we must learn from past mistakes*, that many Highland women were re-trained and shown how to dance 'correctly' in school as young children. She says that such

women "channeled their childhood energy and love of dance into [the newer] Highland Dance, which had all of the acceptability and status lacking in the steps they had learned at home". This type of 'shaming' was seen throughout Scottish society after the innovations of the Victorian era, leading to the eventual disappearance of nearly all other styles of dance. These drastic shifts were able to occur simply because of the marginalised situation of Gaelic society following the 19th century Clearances. Many Gaels left, seeking to preserve their lifestyle in new lands, and many of those who stayed were forced to integrate into urban society, eventually losing much of their cultural identity. This left a nearly blank canvas for the changes seen over the next 200 years which would come to define historical perception of the Highland Gael. Hugh Cheape surmises the idea of a transformed Scottish bagpiping culture in his "Coda", writing: "the instrument has been

reinvented, the performer constrained, and the music re-crafted". It is this very tradition that continues to predominate the social perception of Scottish culture across the globe. Until these stereotypes are examined and challenged by musicians and historians alike, alternative narratives in piping will continue to fall on deaf ears, dismissed as unauthentic or irrelevant. ●

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

This selection has been edited for readability, removing any in-text citations and footnotes. For a complete list of references please see the full text of this chapter hosted online at www.thepipingcentre.co.uk/magazine.

Cannon, Roderick D. *The Highland Bagpipe and Its Music*. 1988. Edinburgh: Birlinn Publishers, 2008.
 Cheape, Hugh. *Bagpipes: A National Collection of a National Instrument*. Edinburgh: NMS Enterprises Limited, 2008.
 Emmerson, George S. *Rantin' Pipe and Tremblin' String: A History of Scottish Dance Music*.
 Gibson, John. *Old and New World Highland Bagpiping*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008.
 ---. *Traditional Gaelic Bagpiping: 1746-1945*. 1998. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002.
 Shears, Barry. *Dance to the Piper: The Highland Bagpipe in Nova Scotia*. Sydney, Nova Scotia: Cape Breton University Press, 2008.

www.rodymacleodpiobaireachd.com

Roddy MacLeod MBE is the Principal of the National Piping Centre in Glasgow, Scotland and is considered to be one of the most accomplished pipers of his generation and a highly regarded teacher, recitalist and adjudicator.

His website, at www.rodymacleodpiobaireachd.com, provides a growing archive of Piobaireachd music performed on the Highland Bagpipe by Roddy MacLeod and it is hoped that this archive will provide a source of enjoyment to piping enthusiasts as well as a valuable learning and teaching resource.

For each piobaireachd we offer a recording that has been compressed using industry standard 256Kb/s MP3 encoding. We also offer an Adobe PDF version of the manuscript which includes the accompanying canntaireachd and a Bagpipe Music Writer file which can be used as an additional learning aid (Bagpipe Music Writer software is required to play these files). You can also download all three as a package.



www.rodymacleodpiobaireachd.com

If you are interested in contacting Roddy then please e-mail enquiries@rodymacleodpiobaireachd.com