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

3.2 Evolution in Cape Breton

Over 200 years after forces of change began their slow, and perhaps unrealised, transformation of Gaelic dance-music in Scotland, the distant island of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia still holds many vestiges of this forgotten style. Perhaps the transplanted roots of Gaelic pipe music, brought from the Highlands and Western Isles, are to be found in the vibrant and free-flowing culture of this New World Gaidhealtachd. Somehow, after facing many of the same obstacles seen centuries earlier in the ‘Old Country’, Cape Breton Gaels have managed to retain the essence of this ancient music despite the loss of their historic language and the modernisation of their culture to meet the needs of the 20th century.

The connection and interdependence of Gaelic language and music in the development and preservation of Gaelic society is immediately apparent, but the puzzling differences in the dichotomy of these two elements in Cape Breton and Scotland seems inexplicable at times. In his book, Traditional Gaelic Bagpiping: 1746-1945, John Gibson suggests that Scotland has preserved the Gaelic language in many ways, while experiencing a dramatic reshaping of their musical tradition; and Cape Breton has conversely, lost the Gaelic language in most areas, but managed to preserve the fundamental nature of their Gaelic music tradition. This can only be explained by the number of overwhelmingly musical and culturally homogenous communities that made up the core of Cape Breton’s early settlements. These communities were allowed to flourish for years, in nearly complete geographic isolation not possible in Gaelic Scotland during this period. Even during periods of modernisation during the 20th century, the Cape Breton Gaels remained a majority within developing urban centres, in contrast to the Gaelic minorities seen in Lowland Scotland during earlier centuries, creating a drastically slower pace for any cultural changes.

Isolation and Preservation

Even in the 21st century, it is easy to see how a long-forgotten tradition might manage to linger on in the remote island of Cape Breton. Long since the relatively late introduction of major infrastructure and modern communications to this region, life still seems to move slowly. While driving through any of the island’s main two-lane highways, one is often surrounded by wilderness. Dense forests, rugged mountains and wide lakes make up the backbone of this environment. Even with the introduction of modern communications and transportation, this locale remains physically removed from urban centres such as Halifax, five hours southwest of Cape Breton’s most urbanised city, Sydney, with a population of under 25,000. While travelling through the vast majority of the island, it is very clear that there is no connection to 3G mobile broadband and many other characteristics of the modern globalised setting.

The distinguishing isolation of this locale was certainly much greater in years past. When Scottish immigrants landed on Cape Breton Island in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, they were greeted, in many areas, with forests that stretched from coast to coast. Emigrating from the far less wooded settings of the Outer Hebrides, settlers were oftentimes ill-equipped to deal with clearing land and travelling through their new environment. Early homes and farms were notably crude and primitive. Adding to the isolation of these immigrants were the harsh winters characteristic of the north-eastern Atlantic coastline. While early immigrants quickly claimed the best available areas on the coastline, the majority of the population would come to be located in the “backland” areas further inland, where insufficient infrastructure and a lack of bridges would continue to limit travel into the 20th century. Further increasing the isolation of these new world Gaels was their preference for endogamy, marrying between Gaelic families whenever possible, to protect their culture.

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All of these factors nourished the cultural conservatism brought from outlying areas of the Scottish Highlands and Hebrides, such as the island of South Uist, where Gaelic is still spoken today. This sentiment was allowed to grow further in the new communities of the Cape Breton Gàidhealtachd and life was able to carry on in much the same fashion it had in Gaelic Scotland, but without outside interference. While cultural cohesion was shattered in more diversified New World communities such as Australia, New Zealand, the Eastern United States and other areas of Canada, the Gaelic language and lifestyle were able to flourish in the far-removed communities of Cape Breton Island.

A logical counter-argument to claims of purity within Cape Breton Scottish music is the suggestion that perhaps the musical traits characteristic of music and dance in this area represent some sort of cultural innovation on the part of these New World communities. However, this argument overlooks the fact that, in most cases, the isolation faced in Cape Breton not only separated the island from the rest of the country, but also separated individual communities on the island. While musicians did occasionally intermingle, new ideas would only be heard by those within a close proximity of the musician. Therefore, the characteristics that can be seen as shared by the island’s musical community as a whole undoubtedly give a glimpse of what was brought over by early Gaelic settlers of the island. A pre-Victorian style of Gaelic Highland music — the music of community pipers and fiddlers: strathspeys, reels, and jigs played for the Scotch founs, set dances, and solo step-dancing, as well as marches and laments played for funeral processions “in the old Highland fashion”.

Decline of Gaelic Language

AMONG peripheral communities of Gaelic emigrants, it seems that the first step away from traditional Gaelic culture, and music in particular, is the loss of language. Communities that lost use of the Gaelic language early after resettlement, as seen in other areas of North America, rarely retained any remnants of traditional music, save what was later imported as novelty from Scotland. The connection of these two elements is immediately apparent even outside the obvious Gaelic song tradition, upon hearing the rhythms of spoken Gaelic and those present in dance-piping and fiddling.

Even today, it is considered high praise among Cape Bretoners to say that a player “has the Gaelic in their music”. This is aptly echoed by Cape Breton poet Malcolm MacNeil’s In Praise of Gaelic. He writes:

Gaelic Language and the music of the pipes, The two are the same for me; That is no reason to wonder, Since I am descended from the seed of pipers.

While these sentiments still run deep in some areas of Cape Breton, gradual urbanisation and industrialisation would eventually lead to the decline and near disappearance of the Gaelic language, and along with it, traditional piping and fiddling in Nova Scotia.

The community musician or bard was once a function in Gaelic society and a paying job at the expense of the clan chiefs. Left without wealthy patrons, the new social order within Cape Breton communities did not allow for survival on these skills alone, and many musicians were forced to adopt new occupations to supplement their income. Many workers eventually moved to rising urban areas, focusing around coal mining facilities or ports such as Sydney or Glace Bay. Others relocated to the northeastern United States in search of better work. As seen earlier in Scotland and in other immigrant communities, these social changes would have a great impact on the nature of Gaelic traditional life. Barry Shears notes, in his book, Dance to the Piper:

The first three decades of the 20th century witnessed a decline in the number of Gaelic speakers in the region and increased migration from rural areas to urban centres […]. This period also heralded intense changes in Highland piping and the perceptions of Scottish culture among native Nova Scotians. In the case of Nova Scotian pipers the transition was from an ear-trained, community piper to a musically literate one, and from a bagpipe soloist to a pipe band musician […] following the province’s industrial expansion.

This process was allowed in a large extent by the transition from Gaelic to English necessitated by industrialisation. Shears notes that: “as English gradually replaced Gaelic, […] the function of instrumental music gradually changed.”

He parallels the writing of folklore specialist John Shaw who wrote this about the changing nature of Gaelic song in Cape Breton:

Combined with other recent agents of cultural change, the language shift has effectively altered the social context for singing – interrupting the lines of transmission and changing the community’s internal concepts of such fundamental concepts as function, performance, occasion and composition.

As Shears notes, this follows precisely what happened to piping in Cape Breton, and throughout New World Gaelic communities as they made their transitions to urban life. The fundamental difference that sets the tradition apart in Cape Breton is that these changes did not come into widespread effect until the middle of the 20th century, leaving the roots of traditional Gaelic music much more intact than what can be seen in most other communities.

WWI/WWII Pipe Bands

THE 20th century would bring another catalyst for change to community pipers in Nova Scotia. While the conflicts of WWI and WWII were fought far from the shores of North Eastern Canada, many Nova Scotians volunteered for service and came back with an altered perspective on their cultural heritage after service. Many men died in battle serving the British Empire, and many of those who returned viewed themselves as more “worldly”, often becoming dismissive of their Gaelic cultural roots.

The Great Wars also brought the pipe band, as we know it today, to Nova Scotia. While Barry Shears dates the first official Highland pipe ensembles in Canada around 1898 and 1906 – the MacIntyre band of Cape Breton, and the later Pictou County Pipe Band – John Gibson speculates that these groups must have been far less regimented in nature, given that they were purely civilian groups and would have had no exposure to the military style bands of the British Army. While there are no records
of the repertoire of these groups, and the topic remains largely unstudied, there is no reason to assume that simply because these pipers performed together, they were familiar with any type of martial repertoire.

By the time WWI was at its height, more than 25 Canadian pipe bands had formed and enlisted, several of which originated in the province of Nova Scotia. While it is widely assumed that the quality and uniformity of these bands must have been lacking in the beginning, many received subsequent instruction from the British Highland regiments to conform to musical standards. Records show that units including the Cape Breton Highlanders, North Nova Scotia Highlanders, Pictou Highlanders and the West Nova Scotia Regiment all sent pipe bands to be trained at the Army School of Piping at the time of the Second World War. Gibson stresses that despite the training these bands would have received overseas, even by the time of WWII; many pipers within the Highland Regiments of Nova Scotia were still ear-learned. Although there are various accounts of pipers who were taught to use written music and standardised fingerings during service, it seems that the trend did not stick with all players after returning home. One such player was Alex Currie who is discussed in detail in Shears’ book.

Introduction of Lowland Scottish Pipers

ALONG with newly educated pipers who returned from the Highland regiments to lead bands and teach pipers in Cape Breton the modern style, the 20th century also brought a small number of Lowland Scottish pipers to Nova Scotia who aimed to improve the quality of piping in the province. Most of these players immigrated individually, and for personal reasons, unlike the community chain migrations of generations past. Two of the most noteworthy among these pipers were George Dey and Sandy Boyde.

Dey was a highly successful piper in the Scottish competition circuit and piped for the British Army. He was one of the earliest pipers of his kind to move to Nova Scotia specifically to teach piping, immigrating at the request of amateur Scottish-born piper, Robert Thomas, who was starting a pipe band in Halifax. Arriving in 1906, Dey worked with Thomas and his band, eventually branching out to teach several other individuals and groups until he suffered a stroke in 1962. While Dey did not ever teach in Cape Breton, he is noted for his influence in the spread of competition-style piping throughout the province as a whole.

Sandy Boyde arrived in Halifax in 1942 and was also regarded as a highly successful competitor in Scotland. He spent a period directing the Pictou Highlanders Pipe Band in Halifax, before dedicating himself to instruction and solo performance as he travelled through the province. He is held as one of the most influential contemporary pipers in the post-war period due to the breadth of his travels, and is even noted for passing tunes to a few Cape Breton fiddlers, such as Winston Scotty Fitzgerald. He often spent long periods of time staying in homes with various families in rural areas, teaching children to play the bagpipes in exchange for room and board. His influence was far greater than Dey’s earlier work and by the 1970s his pupils were well represented at the piping competitions that had developed in Nova Scotia.

These two Scotsmen alone are responsible for a large amount of the change seen in piping styles within Cape Breton and Nova Scotia as a whole during the 20th century. What the local military pipers began, these men solidified into more than an isolated phenomenon, contributing significantly to the establishment
of the 20th century competition-style as the norm within the province, at least in the more urban public sphere. While their influence was great, it would be an exaggeration to assume that these two men along with a few military pipe bands were able to deteriorate the musical tradition that had flourished here for almost two centuries. These men simply represent one stone of many that threatened to crush the already endangered Gaelic dance-piping idiom in Cape Breton.

The Gaelic College

WHILE both the military piping sect and immigrant Lowland Scots pipers had a large impact on the tradition of community pipers, the greatest threat to such pipers and what was left of the old Gaelic way of life in Nova Scotia was yet to come. In a similar fashion to the demise of all remaining traditional Gaelic arts in the province.

The Gaelic College

The Gaelic College was founded during the mid-1950s in Victoria County, perhaps one of the most Gaelic areas of Cape Breton at this time. While the College's initial mission was to cultivate Gaelic culture as a "living and breathing entity", the work of the Gaelic College in the next several decades has been marked as the most "concentrated effort [...] to fully develop piping in Nova Scotia, via Cape Breton, on the modern Scottish form", according to Shears. With the best of intentions, the Gaelic College regularly shipped top-tier pipers and Highland dancers from Scotland to teach the communities of Nova Scotia the 'true' nature of Scottish traditional music. This 're-education' generally came at the expense of local Gaelic styles that were either ignored or regarded as inferior to modern Scottish impressions of tradition. By the 1960s, the College's summer programme was drawing a diverse group of students composed equally of Cape Bretoners, other Canadians and Americans. Although the College was held with respect by many during this time, discontents who realised the fallacy of the operation offhandedly referred to the programme as the "Tartan Circus".

The founder of the College was a man known as A.W.R. MacKenzie. He began his work with the goal of reviving pride in the Scottish heritage of the province. He wished, ultimately, to "transform Cape Breton into a 'miniature Scotland in North America'". He saw Cape Breton as an area that had allowed its rich cultural heritage to die. This, he claimed, was particularly evidenced by the general lack of Highland pipe bands and especially Highland dancing, noting that the latter had died completely on the island. Showing a complete lack of understanding of local Gaelic piping and dancing, MacKenzie failed to understand that these things had not been "lost" by these people, but had in fact never been part of the tradition practised by the majority of immigrants who settled this island. After coming under fire by a few remaining critics, MacKenzie eventually acknowledged the fact that his curriculum might not be native to the island and responded by arguing that Gaelic was in fast decline and that the declining traditions of the island "had to be replaced with something".

A second figure who contributed significantly to the revisionist path of the Gaelic College was Seamus MacNeil. He was the principal of the very influential College of Piping in Glasgow, Scotland, and was brought over to add an air of legitimacy to the staff in Cape Breton. Like MacKenzie, he was blind to the historical importance of the rich music and dance tradition in Nova Scotia. MacNeil was noted for his "typical colonial attitude" and was often extremely critical of local traditions. In an anecdote found in Shears' book, MacNeil reminisced about his work with colleague James MacKenzie, who taught piping and dance at the college. He explains that when James was told the local form of step-dancing originated in Scotland, but had since been forgotten in its native land, James "laughed" saying that to him, it was obvious "this was a form of Irish dancing, but in a country where Ireland and Scotland are fused together in peoples' minds it was probably wishful thinking to attribute the dance to the wrong source". Despite the vein of ignorance and conceit that ran through MacNeil's teaching, he became widely regarded as an expert in the field of traditional Scottish music in the province.

Shears notes that, as the College gradually alienated more and more of the island's native Gaelic community, it became progressively more of a tourist icon and less focused on tradition, instead favouring the type of romanticism that would draw a crowd. It is interesting and perhaps very telling to note that when the Gaelic College became a ward of the State in the 1970s, it fell under control of the department of tourism rather than the department of education. This shows that even in the eyes of the government, the Gaelic College was doing much more business for the economy than it was promoting traditional arts. It was not until much later, after much of the damage had already taken its toll, that new leadership reconsidered its position on the inclusion of the native pipe and fiddle styles.

Decline of Oral Piping Traditions

THE biggest change of the 20th century was the altered perception of Gaelic culture that developed in future generations, growing out of predominantly English-speaking urban areas. Many of these newer generations never learned to speak Gaelic, never went to a traditional ceilidh, and were never exposed to the essential community relations that propagated the older Gaelic way of life. These members of society had only the imported, modern form of Scottish culture to rely on in their quest for identity or cultural relevance. As Shears notes:

["The language and culture of the Gael in Nova Scotia has been gradually replaced with the Victorian/Lowland Scottish stereotype of a kilted, haggis-eating, Burns-quoting Scot, festooned in a costume of dubious authenticity. This 'Cult of Clanship' did little to promote either Gaelic or traditional piping.

Although these new perceptions greatly..."]
Those who have been exposed to his story and his playing often regard his style as a direct window into what might have been played in rural Scotland before the emigrations

affected the province as a whole, the changes would be little felt in more rural areas of Cape Breton. Gibson notes the functionality of the Gaelic language, acting as a socio-cultural anchor to tradition in these areas well into living memory. This seems true even short distances outside urban centres such as Sydney, Antigonish and New Glasgow. More rural areas such as Mabou, the Magarees and Scottsville, of Inverness County, in the western areas of the island, have retained many Gaelic cultural anachronisms including the use of the Gaelic language and traditional dancing to this day. Gibson discusses this area in further detail in Old and New World Highland Bagpiping. Pipers such as Sandy Boyd had little exposure to places such as these and little means to affect any change as they would not have had the Gaelic to communicate effectively with these areas.

Within communities that still valued traditional Gaelic music and dance, three distinct types of pipers emerged, due to the introduction of written music and formally trained players. The first could be classified as those who remained from the original class of community musicians. These were the pipers who had learned completely by ear, used a free form style of fingering and embellishments on the chanter and could not read written music. One such example of this category is Black Angus MacDonald, of Melrose Hill, Inverness County. His history listed in Gibson's Traditional Gaelic Bagpiping notes that he deliberately remained musically illiterate because he was afraid reading music would alter his traditional style for the worse. He was a highly regarded dance-piper and lived until the end of the 1930s. MacDonald was likely one of the last pipers who fitted completely into this category, almost all pipers hereafter would have had some exposure to written music.

The second type of pipers were those who began receiving formal training, including standardised playing technique and musical literacy, while retaining the fundamental rhythms and repertoire of the community dance-piper. This category is typified by pipers such as Joseph Hugh MacIntyre (1891-1968). Joe Hughie was a descendant of immigrants from South Uist, one of the most culturally conservative areas of the Gaelic Scotland and was raised in the French Road area in south-eastern Cape Breton. Growing up in a family of pipers, Joe Hughie began piping at a young age and while he never played in a pipe band, his technique could be described as standardised 19th century Scottish. This means that he used a set scale, as outlined in Joseph MacDonald's Complete Theory (1803), relied on an outdated, but still standardised set of embellishments, and could read music as well as learn by ear. He was in high demand as a dance-piper during his prime and his extremely musical style has been preserved in a few home recordings as well as transcriptions of his playing that have been featured in piping collections compiled by Shears. This was by far the largest category of community pipers during most of the 20th century and many of these players were most likely capable of playing in either the traditional or modern style depending on the setting.

The third group includes pipers such as Alex Currie (1910-1997), who began as traditional ear-trained pipers and later received formal training in involuntary contexts, such as Army pipe bands, which they later rejected as inferior. Currie has been widely regarded as the last of his kind by those studying the history of Cape Breton pipers and is held in the highest regard by those who met him. He was perhaps the last living player who learned completely by ear and used no standardised techniques. His scale, embellishments and setting of tunes were all uniquely his own, despite attempts by others to conform his style. Most knowledge of Currie's playing is found in the form of various personal interviews with musicians interested in his style, such as Hamish Moore and Barry Shears, as well as in a few old home recordings of his playing. Currie first learned tunes from the Gaelic singing of his mother and grandmother before learning to play the pipes. He then learned how to make a chanter out of a local timber and taught himself how to play from scratch. He grew up playing with the bag under the 'wrong' arm and his hands 'backwards', right-over-left on the chanter. Like many untrained pipers, he was noted for using a variety of different fingerings to produce slightly different pitches, or flavours, in order to replicate the style of playing he had learned as a boy. In his 30s, Alex served in the P.E.I. Black Watch, where his superior attempted to retrain his technique. While he eventually switched his bag arm to the conventional side, he retained his hand position, scale, embellishments and never truly learned to read music. He deemed his older style of learning and playing tunes "more accurate" than what was written in books. Those who have been exposed to his story and his playing often regard his style as a direct window into what might have been played in rural Scotland before the emigrations. Currie's death in the late 1990s marked the end of an era, all other living pipers having learned through some amount of conventional training by that point.

THE next issue will feature the final section of Chapter 3, including the preservation of this dance-music tradition within Cape Breton's fiddling, with in-depth discussion of musical sources, as well as a look at the modern revival of 'Old Style' piping in Nova Scotia. The forthcoming article will also feature the conclusion of this series, with a discussion of current dance-piping traditions within Scotland and Cape Breton, from Chapter 4 of the thesis, and some reflections from the author.

This feature 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.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: