CHAPTER 2 – THE PAST

2.1 A Common Root

Long before the first emigrants left Scotland for the east coast of Canada, long before the advent of military pipe bands or the novelty of Highland games and piping competitions were imagined, all pipers in Scotland are thought to have shared a common tradition. Despite the iconic imagery associated with the Highlander, his kilt and his pipes; the bagpipe is thought to be, in fact, a relatively late comer to the Scottish Gaelic communities of the Highlands, collectively known as the Scottish *Gaidhealtachd*. Prior to this arrival the primary instrument in this society was the harp, or *clarsach,* and it is thought the harp provided both ‘folk’ music and the music of the court from as early as the 9th century (H. Cheape, 2008, 28).

Around the late 14th century, the pipes are thought to have reached Scotland by way of Germany and France, then England.[1] Although many people have assumed that the bagpipe is uniquely Scottish or Irish, there are in fact various kinds of bagpipes found throughout mainland Europe, most of which predate the Scottish Highland bagpipe by many years. It is thought that bagpipes saw their heyday in mainland Europe between the 12th and 17th centuries (Cheape 30).

By the 16th century the pipes had secured a firm role in Gaelic society. This is evidenced by a variety of early historical sources cited by Cannon, Cheape, and Shears.[2] While some scholars argue this as the earliest date for pipes in the Gaelic Highland communities (MacInnes 1), Cannon responds to this opinion by pointing out that these references imply an already healthy tradition, not one in its infancy. He cites records of martial use and lamentation of the dead as applications of the pipes not seen elsewhere in Europe. Cannon suggests that the bagpipe was not only known to the Gaels, but it had been there long enough to have become an integral part of their way of life (Cannon 8). Why then are there no earlier written references recorded before this point? The literature that predominates earlier Highland society is largely poetic in nature and factually suspect at best (J. Gibson, 2001, viii; Cannon 7); and in light of the innovations mentioned above, Cannon suggests 1400 AD as the latest possible date for the entrance of the pipes to Gaelic society

1H. Cheape, 2008; R.D. Cannon, 2008; and B. Shears, 2008 in agreement.

2Again, agreed upon by Cheape, Cannon, and Shears, plus I. MacInnes, 1988; whose thesis largely begins modern scholarship on the issue.

(Cannon 8).

The role of the Highland bagpipe merged into the preexisting musical tradition, which was already an essential part of Gaelic culture (Cheape, 35; MacInnes, 1). Cheape points out that, as with any new instrument in society, “The pipes would have been of little interest [in Scottish society] until they played the music that people wanted to hear” (Cheape 30). In this regard, the piper came to fill the hereditary role of the harper and bard before him and in some cases may have come from the same family lines.[3] It has been suggested that many preexisting musical families may have picked up the pipes after their rise in popularity to maintain a living. Notable early pipers such as Uilleam MacBeathaig, Ian Dall MacKay, and William MacMurchy descended from bardic families and many others are said to have been fine poets in their own right. Other famous piping families such as the MacCrimmons and Cummings are thought to have begun as harpers and fiddlers respectively. Piper Raghnall Mac Allein Oig of Cross is remembered as a player of the pipes, *clarsach*, and fiddle (MacInnes 9-11).

In light of these connections, it is not hard to imagine a great exchange of ideas between these branches of the Highland musical tradition in the early development of the pipe repertoire. Other scholars do not limit these connections solely to the instrumental music tradition. George Emmerson’s book on Scottish Dance music, *Rantin’ Pipe and Tremblin’ String* highlights the connection of pipe music to an old vocal form of dance music known as *puirt-a-beul*, literally translated as ‘tunes from the mouth’.[4] While Emmerson limits the vocal/instrumental connection of bagpipe music solely to these tunes (198), the connection of pipe music and Gaelic song-airs has been sufficiently established since his work was published.[5]

In clan society, the piper would be responsible for providing music for both the clan chief’s court and for warriors in battle.[6] The piper’s duties would not be limited strictly to these martial tasks, for there is also a strong tradition of pipers accompanying dances, as well as playing work songs to accompany harvesters, rowers, or millers (Shears 31-32; Cheape 36).

3See MacInnes (1988), Chapter 1; Cheape (2008), Chapter 3 – esp. “Bardic Roots”.

4See G. Emmerson (1971) – esp. Chapter One, “Instrumental Social Dance”

5See A. MacDonald (1995)

6MacInnes (1988) attributes the utility of the bagpipe for this purpose as a large reason for the displacement of the harp – increased volume, strident tone, etc.

Cannon, in his chapter on dance music, suggests that “there can be no doubt that Highlanders danced to the bagpipe from the very earliest time of the instrument”.[7]

The piper’s position, as that of the harper and bard before, was one held in high regard and taken very seriously, and there is evidence showing a vibrant tradition of regional schools where pipers were sent to perfect their craft. This was no different for harpers and bards in times before the pipes were popularized (Cheape 47-48). Scholars speculate that the regional schools taught basic skills within this tradition, including oral transmission of tunes and techniques of composition (Shears 24). While some have suggested a near monastic nature of this tuition over a period of many years, modern scholars warn us against such romantic notions suggesting a period of maybe a few months of study at a time (MacInnes 4).

Despite the relatively firm convictions that are held about the function of the Highland bagpipe within early Gaelic society, the exact nature of its music in this era is largely unknown. What we do know is that the tradition was largely oral/aural in nature with little in the way of manuscripts or tutorials to examine. On this account, any attempt to define performance style before the 19th century must be largely based on speculation. It is almost impossible to trace any logical evolution within Scottish music as a whole due to the overwhelming effect of Victorian era romanticism on the tradition, an issue which will be discussed in chapter 3.

Despite this limitation, recent scholarship has come to a relative consensus as to what the early tradition may have looked like, and most of the evidence behind these ideas has come from examining the musical tradition of early immigrants from the Highlands to Cape Breton at the end of the 18th century. As highlighted by Shears among other writers about the immigration:

> “Tens of thousands of Gaels who came to the region later known as the Canadian Maritimes left Scotland before this evolution occurred. As a result, a form of traditional Highland bagpipe music survived in this area far longer than in Scotland.” (Shears 40)

Even among these peripheral Gaelic communities historical resources are certainly not abundant, but scholars such as Barry Shears and John Gibson maintain that enough sources are intact to paint a picture of piping in the 18th century Gaelic Highland communities left

7Cannon (2008) bases this claim on the fact that the pipes were used primarily as a source of dance in every other known society. He supports this notion with legal records from throughout the country rebuking pipers for playing dances on the Sabbath.

behind by these immigrants. This picture includes a rich, unitary tradition of instrumental and vocal music with inseparable ties to dance.[8]

While there have been many over the years who have attempted to discount this connection as simply contrived or incorporated from other cultures, there has been new evidence in the past two decades that clearly overrules such accusations. With the re-introduction of Cape Breton musicians to Scotland there have been numerous accounts of older women who, having never seen 'Cape Breton step-dancing' before, joining the in the dance step for step, claiming it was something they had learned in their youth, but were told to forget. Others still remember older generations of family members performing these dances in the same exact way.[9] With such concrete evidence of this link surviving even today, the traditions of the early Gaelic immigrants in 18th century Cape Breton cannot simply be brushed aside as evolution or invention. Much to the contrary, their legacy provides perhaps the best available lens for examining pre-Victorian era Gaelic culture.

2.2 Immigration to Cape Breton

Thousands of Gaels emigrated to the Canadian Maritimes from the late 18th to mid 19th centuries, with more than thirty thousand landing in Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia during the 19th century alone (Shears 51). They named this place *Alba Nuadh*, Gaelic for New Scotland, later to be known in Latin as *Nova Scotia*. It is here they brought their language, their music, and their culture. It is here, in the isolation of this undeveloped section of the New World, that eighteenth century Gaelic life would be preserved while radical changes in society wore down the once-vibrant Gaelic culture in their homeland. Authors Johnson and Boswell, in their acclaimed travel narrative from a tour of the late 18th century Highlands, commented thus on the ongoing emigration to the New World:

> Whole neighborhoods formed parties for removal; so that departure from their native country would no longer be in exile. He that goes accompanied carries with him all that makes life pleasant. […] They carry with them their language, their opinions, their popular songs, and hereditary merriment: They change nothing but the place of their

8See Gibson (1998) – In the introduction to his book on precisely this subject (*Traditional Gaelic Bagpiping: 1745-1945*) he notes that it could have just as easily been written on traditional fiddling or dancing as the three are so inseparable in the tradition.

9See M. Moore (1995) and M. Bennett (1994). These accounts will be covered in further detail later in Ch. 4 of this paper.

> abode; and of that change they perceive the benefit. This is the real effect of emigration, if those that go away together settle on the same spot, and preserve their ancient union. (qtd. in Shears 43)

As Shears points out, this sentiment is physically reflected in various place names throughout the island of Cape Breton; Inverness, Iona, Portree, Glencoe: all named after communities left behind, now reproduced in 'New Scotland'. (Shears 43)

Gaelic emigration was brought on by sweeping changes that came to play in the Scottish Highlands in the second half of the 18th century resulting in social, political, economic, and religious strife in the community; all resulting in a direct challenge to the traditional Gaelic way of life. Although historically many scholars have been quick to pin the bulk of these changes on the hardships brought on by the post-Culloden *Disarming Acts*, modern scholars suggest that these new laws had very little effect on the Highland way of life due to sheer problems of enforcement[10]. Aimed specifically at preventing future insurrection after the last major Jacobite uprising, the acts were designed to prohibit the wear of traditional Highland dress and the carrying of weapons among Highlanders. Due to both the limits of troop coverage and the sympathy of Scottish Justices, these laws were rendered mostly an empty threat and a shadow over the communities of the *Gaidhealtachd*[11]*.* Also largely disproven is the notion that these *Disarming Acts* somehow included the bagpipes in the ban as a weapon of war. Gibson persistently attacks this claim in his work, showing that here is little evidence to support the ban in either the text of the law, or in judicial records of the time (Gibson Ch 2).

What did affect these communities was the sheer devastation brought by British soldiers who pursued surviving Scottish Jacobites into the Highlands immediately after the British victory at Culloden. The policies implemented by the British Duke of Cumberland were aimed both to capture all Jacobite leaders and combatants and then to, in his own words, use "systematic devastation as a weapon to discourage rebellion". Further, the Duke decreed "that strong parties should be sent to burn and [sic] distroy all the rebells' country as far as the can goe, and drive their cattle" (qtd. in Gibson 37). Following the battle of Culloden, severe economic hardships were faced by Highland Gaels who were in many cases, now left without

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10Gibson (1998) deals extensively with this topic in chapters 2 and 3

11Ibid

homes or their cattle, which had served for centuries as their primary source of livery.

The second source of conflict for the 18th century Gael came from the Protestant Church in Scotland, now more assertive than ever following the failure of the Catholic Jacobites. Many of the earliest Scottish settlements in the Canadian Maritimes were begun by whole Catholic parishes that uprooted at the suggestion of their community leaders and who immigrated to the New World. Among these settlements is the 1772 Settlement of Malpeque Bay in Prince Edward Island, lead by John MacDonald of Glendale, and financially supported by the Catholic Church. Over the next few years, the Catholic/Protestant split among emigrant pipers would become increasingly more even, as a new evangelical form of Protestantism had taken root in Scotland and was becoming increasingly more repressive to both music and dance in the Highlands (Shears 46).

A final source of discontent came from the collapse of the kelp industry. Harvesting and processing kelp for the manufacture of soap and glass during the Napoleonic Wars became a stabilizing job market for many Western Highlanders when resources from mainland Europe became less easily available. The Outer Hebrides saw a colossal influx of both jobs and workers with a population increase of more than 75% in 1811 alone (Shears 47). Unfortunately, this industry did not last forever and when the wars ended in 1815, so did the market for these jobs. Along with the end of this conflict came the return of numerous Highland soldiers who had been serving in the British military. With such a surplus population, increasingly anglicized landlords began the process that would forever be known as the Highland Clearances. While physical force was generally not employed to remove these families from their homes, subverted channels were used to force Gaels to leave. Rents were driven to unmanageable levels, forcing Gaels to move to arid areas of the West Coast, leaving most families the choice of moving into large cities further inland, or immigrating to the New World (Shears 49).

The immigration can be generally classified in two separate waves; the first, from 1772-1815, was largely comprised of frustrated middle-class Gaels seeking a better life; the second, from 1815-1850, was made up of impoverished tenant farmers victimized during the Clearances. Perhaps the most important factor for the preservation of the Gaelic ideal was the way in which these immigrations occurred. While small groups or individuals occasionally came alone during the earliest and latest stages of the immigration, the bulk of the population came in entire families or even whole communities. Factors such as religion, dialect, and

extended family were of primary concern to immigrant communities, often times causing a direct reflection of the areas left behind in Scotland. This phenomenon, known as “chain migration” often incorporates multi-generational families including children, parents, and grandparents.[12] New World settlements were often very primitive which added to their geographic isolation. A general lack of serviceable roads and bridges kept Cape Breton cut off even from other areas of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick into the 20th century, and therefore Gaelic culture was allowed to flourish virtually unadulterated despite the dramatic changes occurring back in Scotland.

12Quoted in Shears (2008) from Charles Dunn’s *Highland Settler, A Portrait of the Scottish Gael in Nova* Scotia. Reprint, Toronto, 1997.This phenomenon is used to explain the near identical reproduction of Highland communities in the New World. Shears argues that the only thing that changed for these people was their location and culture remained unchanged until the introduction of foreign influences much later on.