

THE IRISH WARPIPES

By Ned Lecic

It is a little known fact that the Scottish Highland Bagpipe or *Piob Mhor* is equally an Irish instrument. When many people think of an Irish bagpipe, if such an idea even comes to mind, they may recall the sweet-sounding chamber instrument known as the Uilleann Pipes. Yet the *Piob Mhor*, or Warpipe, as it is known in Ireland, has a historic tradition in the Emerald Isle going back to before the Uilleann Pipes even existed. Here we will explore the Irish heritage of the *Piob Mhor* and consider how it compares to that of Scottish piping.

EARLY HISTORY

There have been attempts to attribute great antiquity to the Warpipes, but early sources are problematic. Often, old Irish reports of “pipers” are quoted as referring to bagpipers, even though they more likely played flutes or reed pipes. A number of “Medieval” references from W. H. Grattan Flood’s *The Story of the Bagpipe* can hardly be maintained. His claim that pipers participated in the Hundred Years War is unsubstantiated and the pipers he says were banned by the Statute of Kilkenny (1367) were actually “Heidanes”, flute players minstrels or other artists. There is little evidence of Warpipes in either Scotland or Ireland before the late Middle Ages. There are reports of other music, such as Scottish soldiers blowing horns of different sizes to frighten the enemy, but little or nothing about the *Piob Mhor*.

How the bagpipe came to Gaeldom is a matter of conjecture. An instrument quite like a one-droned *Piob Mhor* (similar to the modern Gaita of Spain and the Veuze of Brittany) is known to have existed all over Western Europe. The Gaels may not have adopted the bagpipe until they saw their Saxon neighbors use it. We do not know whether it was Scottish mercenaries playing the pipes in war that inspired the Irish to adopt them, if it went the other way around, or if the Scots and Irish acquired the pipes simultaneously. At any rate, it would seem that the Gaels were playing them by sometime in the period of 1400 to 1500. An Irish manuscript telling the French tale of *Fireabas*, which may date to that century, says at one point “let horns and pipes (*piba*) be played by you to gather your host.” If the date is correct and the writer has bagpipes in mind, this would be the first Irish reference to the Warpipes. In the first half of the sixteenth century, clear records finally appear, almost simultaneously in Ireland and Scotland. A “piper Mac Ille Dhuibh” is mentioned in the book of the Dean of Listmore (c. 1513-1526). Then for 1544, there are records of pipers in the muster rolls of Irish soldiers that fought for Henry VIII at Boulogne. Most telling is the comment by the historian Holinshed for May of that year that “In the same moneth also passed through the citie of London in warlike manner, to the number of seaven hundred Irishmen, having for their weapons darts and handguns with bagpipes before them”. Soon after, we have our first clear report of Warpiping for Scotland. A Frenchman who had been at the Battle of Pinkie Cleugh on 10 September 1547 noted in *La Guerre d’Ecosse* (1556): “And while the French prepared for combat, the wild Scots incited themselves to arms by the sound of their bagpipes.”

For the next century and a half, the pipes figure vividly in reports of Irish culture. In 1566, the English priest Fr. William Good, who had kept school in Limerick, mentioned that the Irish loved the harp, but also that “In war they use the bagpipe instead of a trumpet”. Vincentio Galilei, the father of the astronomer Galileo, confirmed this, giving us the additional information that “With it they accompany their dead to the grave, making such sorrowful sounds as to invite, nay compel the bystander to weep.” A contemporary of this account, John Derricke’s poem *Image of Ireland*, was published in 1581 and describes Sir Henry Sidney’s campaign against Rory O’More. A verse therein indicates that the pipes were already being used to convey signals in battle:

Now goe the foes to wracke
the Kerne apace doe sweate
And baggepype then instead of Trompe
doe lull the back retreat

As in Scotland, important people might have their personal piper. Our first mention of this comes from a Piers Butler, who is noted in his petition to the Privy Council to have slain “Bryen Reoghe, piper to Thomas of the Myll” in July 1583. However, pipers in Ireland may not have been as highly esteemed as they were among the Highland chiefs. It is notable that in Ben Johnson’s play *The Irish Masque at Court*, performed on in 1613 and 1614, footmen danced “to the bagpipe and other rude music” while gentlemen did the same “to a solemn music of harps”. Of course, the English view may have been biased against the pipes. At any rate, the pipes continued to be an instrument of war, and there are a number of references to it being used in 17th century Ireland. They figured in the wars with William of Orange (1689-1691). When William’s rival, James II arrived to Cork City in March 1689, he was received with piping and dancing. On his arrival to Dublin, “the pipers of the several companies played the Tune of The King Enjoys His Own Again”. When William took the throne, many Irish soldiers defected to the service of France. Pipers were naturally to be found among these “Wild Geese”. Spain too had Irish soldiers in its service; at least one unit, the Ultonia (Ulster) regiment, brought the sound of the pipes to Mexico in 1668-71.

DECLINE AND REVIVAL

Pacification of Ireland followed William III’s victory at the Boyne, meaning less opportunity for the martial use of the pipes. Indeed, “Warpipes” is an English term, the Irish and Scottish Gaelic term being simply *Pi(o)b Mhor* (the great pipe). As we have seen, it would have had peacetime use as well, for funerals and dancing at any rate. From the 18th century, however, there was a decline in its use, as a new kind of bagpipe entered the scene. It was termed the “Pastoral or New Bagpipe” in its first tutor, published by John Gheohegan in London in 1746. It was a sweet-sounding instrument that at first had a bellows, and two drones and a chanter - all very long, but eventually received a third drone, special keyed pipes termed “regulators” and a shorter chanter. This instrument was once played throughout the British Isles, but at some point became identifiable as “Irish Pipes”, nowadays often termed Uilleann or “Union” pipes. The popular fashion of 18th century Ireland seems to have shifted toward playing this instrument. Even at funerals, there are indications that this, or else some kind of “small pipes” (either an equivalent of Scottish and Northumbrian smallpipes, or just a term to distinguish the Uilleann Pipes from the “great” Warpipe) was played.

On 11 May 1745, the Irish Brigade helped France win at Fontenoy against the British. Report has it that their pipers played “The White Cockade” and “St. Patrick’s Day in the Morning”. This may have been the last opportunity for the old Irish Warpipers to play in battle. However, their presence continued in several units for at least about a half century. In 1759, Lt. Col. Morgan of the Irish Light Infantry advertised for “good Irish Pipers” in the Cork Evening Post. In 1778, Lord Rawdon formed a Volunteers of Ireland unit in New York, which reportedly included a Warpipe band, the Pipe Major being a Barney Thompson from County Down¹. And on 2 November 1793, a Dublin paper reported that: “A War Pipers Band in Major Doyle’s Regiment (later the Royal Irish Fusiliers) was formed.” Whether this band even survived to the Peninsular War is questionable and for the next half-century or so, we have a dearth of information on the *Piob Mhor* in Ireland. It may not have gone extinct outright, perhaps surviving in isolated spots, or perhaps being simply identified with Scotland. On 4 April 1843, the Scartaglin Temperance Society advertised in the Kerry Examiner for “a man who can play the Scotch pipes. None but a teetotaler need apply!”

By the middle of the century, however, one manifestation of rising Irish nationalism was the revival of Warpiping. This may have started in the military around 1859, when the Royal Tyrone Fusiliers appointed pipers. Civilian interest grew also, and other Irish Army units gradually raised pipe bands. Soon there were attempts to make the revival distinct from Scottish piping in several ways. Possibly due to a lack of representative national dress, pipers began to wear Scottish-style outfits equipped with various features to make them seem more Irish. Typically the kilt was saffron-colored like the material of the old *leine* (tunic shirts, which however once also formed part of Highland dress) reportedly was, green jackets and capes, and “caubeens” – oversize green berets. In addition, many pipers’ instruments lacked one tenor drone, which was

based on 16th-century depictions of the Irish pipes as a two-droned instrument. Another issue was that the limited compass of the chanter could not accommodate many traditional Irish tunes, and several makers attempted to solve this by adding keys to it. One of them, William O'Duane significantly re-made the pipes into his gigantic "Dungannon" model, which however sank into obscurity, while the London pipe maker Starck, who had collaborated with O'Duane, achieved some success with the simpler but still remarkable "Brian Boru" bagpipe. The chanter of this had keys which enabled it to play the entire range of Irish music and the drones, tenor, baritone and bass, were held in one stock, with separate stocks as an option. Some pipers simply fitted the modified chanter to their existing two- or three-droned pipes. As the fingering differed from that of the old chanter, Starck introduced a "Scottish pattern" with a more conventional system, in order to facilitate transition to the Brian Boru pipes for players who already played the ordinary chanter.

Thus there was some variety among the revivalists, and for much of the 20th century, there was inconsistency among the Irish regiments as to the variant of Warpipe played: one had the two-droned pipes, another the Brian Boru sets. The Royal Irish Fusiliers had Brian Borus in the 1920s and 30s, but later switched to two-droned pipes. The Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers in the 1960s had Brian Boru chanters, though they reportedly had half the band playing the regular chanter. Distinctions disappeared with amalgamation into the Royal Irish Rangers in 1968, and now all the pipe bands of the British and Irish armed forces play three-droned pipes. Most civilian pipers now play a three-droned set as well, but a few bands playing Brian Boru chanters, such as Cavanaleck and Crimson Arrow, remain. Brian Boru pipes may still be had from the English maker Christopher Bayley or from Pakistan.

On the surface, the modern scene of Irish Warpiping would seem to differ little from Highland Piping. Irish bands play the Highland-style pipes; they wear the modified Scottish-style uniforms or even unadulterated Highland dress. Just as Scottish pipers play some Irish tunes, Irish pipers play many Scottish tunes. At first glance it would seem that the Irish tradition of Warpiping has been taken over by the Highland tradition. But is this really the case? I will now argue that this is only partly true, as when we say "Irish Warpipes" and "Scottish Highland Bagpipes", we are really dealing with one and the same instrument, the *Piob Mhor*, whose tradition in Ireland is comparable to its tradition in Scotland, and which has naturally evolved over time.

WHAT WAS THE OLD IRISH WARPIPE LIKE?

To begin with, let us consider the musical traditions of Ireland and Scotland, which once had very similar Gaelic cultures, so that we naturally find common traditions. As an example, both Scots and Irish played the Gaelic harp, of which original instruments are comparable in shape for both countries. It is therefore logical that the old Scottish and Irish *Piob Mhor* would probably have been the same instrument, allowing for some regional variation. Certainly there are indications that the much of same kind of music was played, namely that *piobaireachd*, the "classical music of the pipes" commonly associated with Scotland and the MacCrimmons of Skye, was equally an Irish genre. At an early Scottish piping competition, one piper played an "Irish pibrach" and the possible Irish origin of some of this kind of music has been considered. The MacCrimmons themselves may have had Irish students at their piping college, who would not only have learned *piobaireachd*, but would presumably have had to play an instrument that was physically like the Scottish one. Unfortunately, physical evidence of this is scarce and tends to be unclear.

A famous engraving in the aforementioned *Image of Ireland* shows a piper leading Irish kerne into battle with a large instrument composed of an extremely long chanter, two drones of unequal length apparently held together in one stock, and a bag held in front rather than under the arm. Another image of a piper lying dead does not give further information. If a cartoon, the main picture is comparable to a more realistic picture by Lucas De Heere of Ghent, painted around 1575, depicting Irish dress from the time of Henry VIII. It shows the exact same position and features of the instrument, and it seems that both it and Derricke's illustration were copied from another original source. These illustrations, made by artists who likely were not familiar with the

details of the Warpipe's appearance, seem to actually depict a kind of bagpipe played in the German countries at the time. A picture from an Irish topographical history, *Dinnseanchus*, may be a bit more telling. The manuscript is thought to date from the 16th century and contains an initial letter in the form of a pig playing a two-droned bagpipe. Here the drones are depicted in separate stocks and while the picture is on the whole simplistic, it looks like it might represent a real early *Piob Mhor* with a tenor and a bass drone and the pipes arranged in the usual fashion. A similar picture a piper from roughly the same period, found in the missal of the Abbey of Rosglas, shows the same basic features. It is sketchy, but there is an interesting detail: as in the Medieval bagpipe, the pipes have bell-shaped ends. This is borne out even more clearly in a sketch attributed to some English soldier present at the Battle of Ballyshannon in the 1590s. It shows a long bass drone, a smaller drone (hanging at the side!) and a chanter. All pipes have flaring ends and oddly enough, the blowpipe is attached to a neck in the bag, perhaps the artist's mistake. From these depictions, one may at least conclude that the 16th – century Irish Warpipes still had the appearance of the Medieval pipes but with both the bass drone and what was probably a tenor drone². Whether the Irish pipes ever got the third drone may at present only be conjectured, but it is interesting that a cartoon of Cruickshank's depicting the Irish Troubles of 1798 shows a piper roughly sketched with three drones. However, whether Cruickshank would have had an appropriate model, as he was drawing years later, and whether the Warpiper's presence at the scene was even correct is questionable.

Does this mean that the Irish pipes were somehow different from the Scottish instrument? Since we have no contemporary Scottish pictures and since even having two drones was an innovation among many different kinds of 16th-century bagpipes, there is no reason to believe that the *Piob Mhor* was any different in Scotland at the time. Perhaps it was and perhaps it wasn't; there is simply no direct evidence. Our first depictions from Scotland, beginning in the late 17th or early 18th century, show all three drones, but it is likely, given the development of the bagpipe in Western Europe as a whole, that there would have been one bass and one tenor a century before. And what about those Highland pipers who once played sets with no *bass* drone? According to the 1803 edition of Joseph MacDonald's *Compleat Theory of the Scots Highland Bagpipe*, this was an innovation of the West Highland pipers who thought that having only tenor drones made the sound of the chanter clearer. This kind of bagpipe was banned at Highland Games from 1821. Such pipes do not seem to have been limited to Scotland, however, as the only complete old Irish Warpipe known to have recently existed shows. It belonged to the Musee de Cluny in Paris and was reportedly played at Fontenoy in 1745. The museum seems to have discarded the pipes by the 1960s, but Alexander Macaulay, who sketched them in 1936, wrote in 1968 that the instrument was similar to the contemporary Highland set at Blair Castle, said to have been played at Culloden. Like the latter, the Fontenoy pipes had a larger chanter and fingerholes than what we see today. According to Macaulay's note in Francis Collinson's *The Story of the Bagpipe* (1975), the two drones were *short* - apparently tenor drones like the West Highland type of the time³. According to a museum catalogue picture from 1902, they had a green bag cover, and the drones were set in one stock, forming an elongated U-shape. Collinson explained this as the drones being bent, but this seems unlikely. It is more probable that the pipes had a forked double drone stock like the tenors in the painting of the Piper to the Laird of Grant (1714). The only other old Irish *Piob Mhor* specimen that I have been able to find is a chanter in the Edinburgh University Collection bearing the stamp of the Uilleann Pipe maker Kenna of Dublin, from around the early 19th century. This chanter is in all respects like a Scottish one, of stained cocus wood with a bone sole. Its length of 354 mm is comparable to that of a modern B-flat chanter. My only question is whether Kenna had based this chanter on a Scottish bagpipe with the express intent of making it "Scottish", or whether, whatever the background of the design, he had seen it as an Irish Warpipe or Warpipe in general.

CONCLUSION

On the whole, it may reasonably be said that the *Piob Mhor* is a pan-Gaelic instrument and that while there have been some distinctions over the years, its traditions in Ireland and Scotland are comparable. While it is hard to find proof of the matter, evidence gleaned from existing material indicates that in both countries the pipes were crafted as essentially the same instrument for playing similar musical genres. It is perhaps

regrettable that a more authentically Irish national dress for pipers has not been developed, but there is little evidence to suggest that the musical tradition itself has been bastardized by contact with Scotland. Rather than taking a purist stance and attempting to make Irish piping stand wholly apart, it is, in my opinion, progressive to be able to share music and customs between the two nations, as musicians have been doing for many years.

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Barnaby Brown's website about *Piobaireachd*

FOOTNOTES

¹ On a 1780 muster roll of the unit, "Piper Barney Thompson" is noted. As another person is listed as a "fifer", it may be quite safely assumed that Thompson was indeed a bagpiper and not a fifer.

² In Richard Stanihurst's *De Rebus Hibernicis* (1586), the author describes the Irish pipes as having two drones of unequal length, though he misidentifies them as melody pipes.

³ Collinson noted that in the sketch sent to him by Macaulay, one drone was slightly longer than the other. I suspect that this did not mean any difference in tuning, but that it was a result of the sketchiness of the drawing. Even if it was, say, a baritone drone, this would not necessarily make it distinct from Highland pipes, as the Blair Castle set too has one drone a bit longer and thicker than the other.