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Grafting Culture: On the Development and Diffusion of the Strathspey in Scottish Music

WILLIAM LAMB

In his article, ‘Gaelic Song and the Dance’, Dr John MacInnes speculates that an early dance-song tradition may lie behind some forms of Gaelic labour song and instrumental music. He proposes that the modern Gaelic term for dancing, *dannsa* (< Fr *dance*), could have overtaken an earlier word, *luinneag* (2006: 262). Today, *luinneag* tends to mean a ‘ditty’. However, in the recent past, *luinneag* was used to denote ‘choral songs with vocal refrains’ (*ibid*), such as those found in the waulking and dance-song traditions. MacInnes suggests that *dannsa* might have displaced *luinneag* at some point to mean the dance act in a general sense, with *luinneag* continuing in a more limited context (262). This is an attractive argument, and it offers a sound retort to the claim that the Gaels did not dance before their contact with Norman traditions because they lacked a word for ‘dancing’. It also raises the question, could aspects of an older Gaelic dance-song tradition be lurking in ostensibly modern musical forms? MacInnes (2006: 254) proposes that tune types such as the strathspey, jig and reel might be older than they seem: ‘perhaps *ceòl-beag*¹ borrowed initially from vocal music, whatever influences subsequently modified its genres’ (*ibid.*). This is plausible: instrumental dance music traditions the world over are known to have developed from earlier dance-song (Sachs 1937: 181). Here, as in many of his articles, MacInnes signposts uncharted territory in Scottish ethnology and hands over a road map.

I recently strove to contribute to this particular map by investigating the origins of the strathspey (Lamb 2013). The evidence led me to believe that, before it gained a separate designation, the ‘strathspey’ was simply the style in which Gaels tended to sing and play for dancing. Going back further, I speculated that its ultimate origins might lie in an earlier form of Gaelic movement-song. If this is true, it is clear that the modern tune type has evolved away from its vocal roots. How could this have happened? What socio-cultural milieu could have produced the strathspey, as we know it today? Furthermore, why was it named thus? In the following article, I will provide a preliminary response to these questions and suggest that the strathspey, as a type of instrumental dance music, is an artefact of historical intercultural contact between Gaelic and Anglo society. As I write, however, I am conscious that my basic premise might seem controversial to some readers. Accordingly, it will be useful to discuss some of the reasons for proposing that the strathspey evolved from song before proceeding.

The Origins of the Strathspey: An Overview

The strathspey is typically understood to be an eighteenth-century variety of fiddle music instigated by two well-known musical families native to the Spey valley region, the Browns and the Cummings (see Newte 1791: 163–165; Collinson 1966: 206; Bruford 1994: 74; Doherty 1999; Newton 2009: 253). Campbell (1798: 20) describes it as being ‘peculiar to the great tract of country through which the river Spey runs’. However, evidence suggests that it was more widely distributed.² Dance master Francis Peacock (1727–1807), who worked with students from across the *Gaidhealtachd*, writes that the strathspey ‘is, in many parts of the Highlands preferred to the common Reel’ (1805: 89–90). Peacock’s statement is supported by evidence from an early collection of Gaelic music (McDonald 2000), which contains traditional melodies described as

¹ That is, instrumental dance music (lit. ‘small music’).

² See Gibson (1998: 110–115) for additional information on this point, from the perspective of bagpiping.

strathspeys from the North Highlands (e.g. Sutherland), Perthshire and the Western Isles. Of course, a distinctive form of dance-music could have diffused across the Highlands and Islands over time. Nevertheless, the defining quality of the strathspey, ‘a dotted quaver-semiquaver rhythm and the inversion of this, the “Scotch-snap”’ (Collinson 2012: see Figure 1), is widely represented in the Gaelic labour song and dance-song genres. As Emmerson states, ‘[I]t is not possible to claim that the rhythm is peculiar to the district of Strathspey, for it has an obviously ancient hold on the vocal dance music of the Gael’ (1972: 173).³ Although we have yet to reach a consensus on the age of Gaelic dance-song, labour song is no doubt older than the eighteenth century.⁴ Hence, if a ‘strathspey’ is merely its characteristic rhythm,⁵ then there was nothing to diffuse; the rhythm was already present in Gaelic culture. On the other hand, the testimonies of Newte and Campbell give us reason to believe that the Spey river valley spawned something. To better understand its nature, we must first interrogate our terminology, for ‘strathspey’ means too many things.

Figure 1: Dotted rhythms and ‘Scots snaps’ in the strathspey: the first two bars of ‘Let’s to the Ard’ (Bremner: 62)



It is useful to distinguish between the strathspey as a ‘rhythmic meme’ closely associated with Scottish Gaelic movement song, the strathspey as a conventionalised form of instrumental dance music, the ‘slow strathspey’ – a later, more refined version (Bruford 1994: 74) – and the strathspey as a type of dance.⁶ Here, we will concern ourselves with the first two forms only. By making these distinctions, we avoid circularity and introduce an important diachronic dimension. Given the highly developed and archaic Gaelic song tradition – and remembering that instrumental dance music tends to develop from dance-song (Sachs 1937: 181) – we can be certain that Gaelic song imbued a rhythmic substrate (i.e. the meme) upon a later instrumental tradition as opposed to the converse. Unless we are prepared to believe that the Gaelic movement song tradition is a relatively modern development, and that it was conditioned by fiddle music, we must accept that the meme existed in Gaelic culture long before it was recognised in Strathspey. In other words, the strathspey must have evolved from Gaelic song. However, what is its cultural provenance, exactly? Herein lies a paradox, for the Spey valley region was on the boundary between two cultures in 1749,⁷ when

³ Keith Norman MacDonald was thinking along similar lines when he said: ‘there is very strong evidence to show that much of our strathspey music was taken originally from the Gaelic’ (see Lamb 2012: 135). In the preface to Angus Cumming’s collection of strathspeys – the first by a native of the area – it says: ‘THAT species of musical composition called a REEL, and particularly the STRATHSPEY REEL, is the CATCH, the brisk and lively SONG, of the natives of Caledonia’ (see Alburger 2007: 254) [emphasis in original].

⁴ William Matheson contends that most of the waulking songs are from the seventeenth century, although the genre itself ‘must have existed from a much earlier period’ (in Collinson 1966: 70f). One lullaby featuring the rhythmic meme, ‘*Griogal Cridhe*’, is thought to date from 1570. See Lamb 2013 for other examples.

⁵ In musical terms, for instance, there is no structural difference between the strathspey and the common reel.

⁶ These distinctions are somewhat artificial, but necessary for our analysis. Properly, in earlier times in Scotland, music and dance were a unified notion; they were a semantic fusion from our modern standpoint (Lamb 2013: 71). See Flett for information on the strathspey as dance.

⁷ It first appears as a form of dance in the Menzies ms (1749). Two items occur in volume III of *The Caledonian Pocket Companion* (Oswald 1743–59) named ‘A New Strathspey Reel’. This volume might have

the strathspey first entered into the written record. In fact, there is good reason to believe that the strathspey *qua* tune type is a product of that very contact.

Grafting and Diffusing Culture in Eighteenth Century Strathspey

Contact between ethnic groups often precipitates swift and dramatic changes in a region's musical culture (Nettl 2005: 282). When that contact results in certain aspects of one culture's traditions becoming superimposed upon those of another, it is called a culture graft (Sachs 1962: 212). This is a useful way of understanding the strathspey. Sachs (*ibid.*) provides an example of culture graft from the Orang Kubu culture of Sumatra, whose instruments are Malay. Contact with the Malay people led to the type of music associated with these instruments being grafted upon the Kubu's native song traditions. A similar phenomenon appears to have occurred in early modern times in Strathspey. In this case, musical change was catalysed by the appearance of an Italian instrument, the modern violin.

It is difficult to say when the modern violin arrived in Scotland (Collinson 1966: 203), but it was certainly present by the late seventeenth century.⁸ As in the Lowlands, we can assume that it was introduced to the Spey valley region via the gentry, who had a keen interest in classical music, European culture, and social dance (Johnson 1972: 101; Emmerson 1972: 78). Violin players are recorded in Elgin, at Thunderton House – from 1710 – and Nairn, at Kilravock Castle (Johnson 1972: 28). Hugh Rose, the laird of Kilravock, was host to Charles Edward Stuart two days before Culloden and purportedly entertained him on the violin (*ibid.*). The title 'Castle Grant' turns up in the Bodlein Manuscript (Young 1740), a collection of Scottish country dances with music and figures (Emmerson 1971: 224–5), indicating that this baronial home in the heart of Strathspey was a musical one, at least in an appreciative capacity. Corroborating the information above, Emmerson (1972: 78) depicts the landed families of Strathspey and northern Perthshire⁹ as the movers and shakers of Scottish social dancing in the eighteenth century.¹⁰ Thus, we know that the social élite of the Spey valley region had an interest in classical and Scottish dance music, and could well have introduced the violin to the area, either directly or via their contacts.

As in the case of the Orang Kubu, aspects of repertoire and technique followed the new instrument and influenced native Gaelic culture (Dunlay and Greenberg 1996: 4, 11; Newton: 2009: 253¹¹).¹² By the time that the first arrangements of anonymous strathspeys appear in Bremner (1757), we see multiple parts, the full violin compass and bass arrangements. Clearly, these are not transcriptions of pre-literate musical performances. Beyond a collection having a superficial badge

appeared in 1745 (see Alburger 1996: 45), but, as no date occurs in the front matter of the collection, we cannot be certain.

⁸ The first evidence for its use in Scottish folk music – or any kind of music in Scotland for that matter – is a tutor from 1680, *Lessones for y^e violin*, in which Scots melodies are presented as practice pieces or warm-ups for the more difficult classical arrangements (Johnson 1972: 17, 101).

⁹ It appears that the 'strathspey' was known in Perthshire as well. As mentioned, Patrick McDonald's collection (1784) features tunes described as strathspeys in the Perthshire section. Additionally, the title of McGlashan's 1786 collection, *A Collection of Reels Consisting Chiefly of Strathspeys, Athole Reels...* indicates that the strathspey might have been known in northern Perthshire as the 'Athole reel' (see Alburger 1996: 67).

¹⁰ Keith Sanger has reached the same conclusion after archival research on these families' histories.

¹¹ Newton (2009: 253) maintains that this new repertoire and technique provided the impetus for the strathspey. By discriminating between the rhythmic meme and the modern tune type, we can see how the meme existed before European-based influences, but became incorporated within a type of instrumental music, *per se*, only after these influences had become manifested in Highland musical culture.

¹² It might have even become intertwined with pre-existing medieval fiddle traditions (Johnson 1972: 101).

of authenticity, what mattered most to professional musicians, like Bremner, was how well it would be received in the drawing-room (Gelbert, in McAulay 2013: 30), for ‘a traditional tune was still regarded as traditional even if it was played on the pianoforte in a well-to-do parlour’ (McAulay 2013: 103). Still, Bremner was the first collector to take proper notice of Highland dance music traditions (Collinson 1966: 207; cf Alburger 1996: 53) and we have reason to believe that some of these melodies, at least, were based upon pre-existing dance-songs (see Lamb 2012: 23).¹³ Classical sensibilities and the new musical opportunities presented by the violin clearly blended with the native Gaelic dance-song tradition, and Bremner’s arrangements might be our first indication of this process.

Regarding how the strathspey *qua* tune type diffused, we must remember that it would have easily taken root in the Highlands because it was so close to what was already present. Apart from new compositions, techniques and ornamentation, little would have been available for diffusion. The tune collectors *cum* professional musicians would have grown aware of the strathspey and, through their publications, helped to legitimise its association with Speyside. We can imagine that Gaelic speakers, for whom the strathspey *qua* rhythmic meme was an autochthonous idiom (see Lamb 2013: 75), would have been amenable, yet inwardly amused, when informed that the strathspey was a new creation. However, because few Highlanders were literate in the eighteenth century, and the *Gàidhealtachd* was almost entirely populated by monoglot Gaelic-speakers (MacKinnon 1991: 63),¹⁴ we have little in the written record to challenge its espoused origin. As ever, history is written by the writers. Certainly, Lowlanders would not have challenged the notion that the strathspey came from Strathspey; they were far too ignorant of the *Gàidhealtachd*. Until the military roads of General Wade became common thoroughfares in the post-Culloden period, the region was a veritable *terra incognita* (Rackwitz 2007: 151). Therefore, a lack of literacy and language barrier, on one hand, and an ignorance of Gaelic culture, on the other, explains why the strathspey *qua* tune type has been conflated with the strathspey *qua* rhythmic meme for so long.

It is difficult to evaluate the level of past intercultural contact between Anglo and Gaelic society in Strathspey. However, a clear indication that contact did occur there in the early to mid-eighteenth century – while it did not, in other parts of the Highlands – comes from a data set well-suited to our needs: the place-names in early Scottish dance music collections. We will examine this presently, and conclude by discussing its implications for the culture graft hypothesis.

Place-names in Scottish Dance Music Titles

From Gore’s database, I retrieved every fiddle title place-name that appeared between 1700¹⁵ and 1783 (N=180).¹⁶ A colleague specialising in Scottish toponymy, Dr Jake King, helped to standardise, grid reference and plot the place-names on a digital map. We discarded place-names that we could not locate with confidence.¹⁷

Table 1: Place-name categories

Dedications to noble personage	54%
Geographical features and settlements	19%
Baronial houses	7%
Other dedications	6%
Transportation (roads and bridges)	4%
Misc	10%

¹³ Certainly, this is true of the first collection of ‘Old Highland Reels’ by a native of Strathspey, Angus Cumming (see Lamb 2013: 73).

¹⁴ MacKinnon indicates that only about 10% of Highlanders were able to speak English in 1800: 300,000 Gaelic-only speakers existed out of a total population of 335,000 (1991: 63).

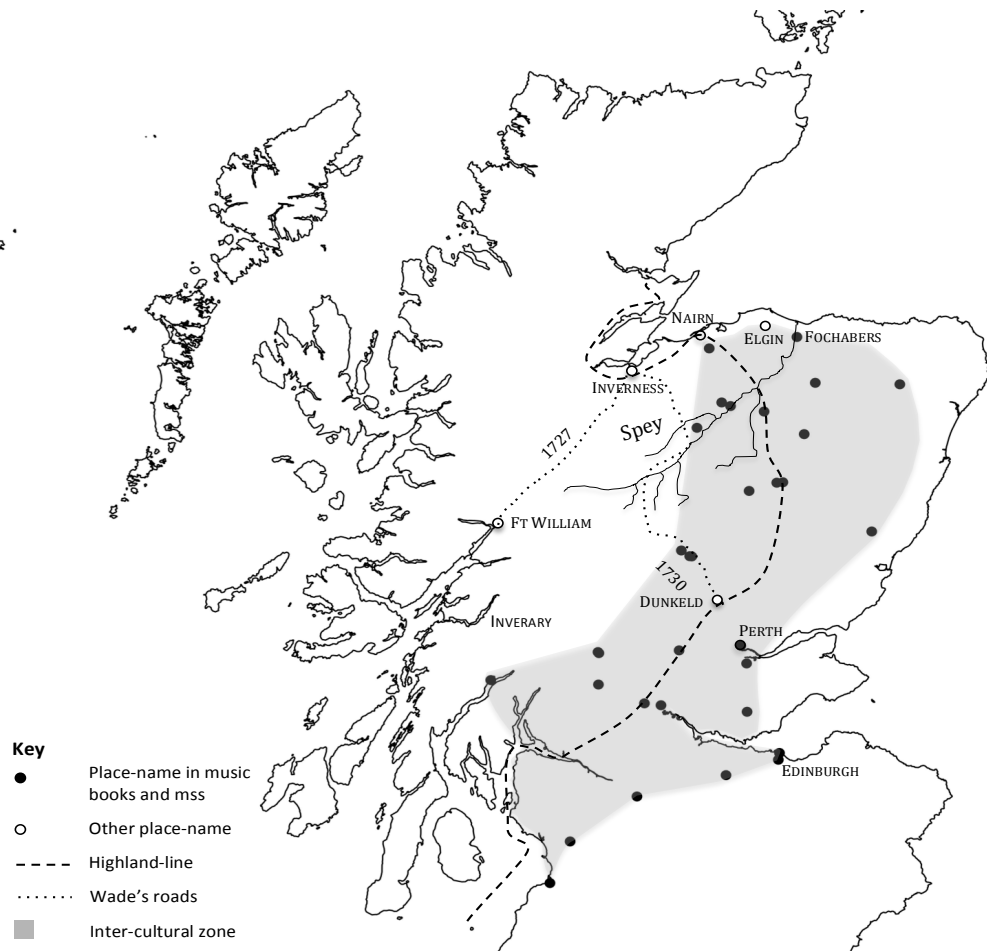
¹⁵ The year of the first publication in Gore to feature Scottish place-names: Playford’s *A Collection of Original Scotch-Tunes (Full of the Highland Humours) for the Violin*.

¹⁶ Three years after Cumming’s collection (1780) was published.

¹⁷ Occasionally, with common place-names, it was impossible to determine the intended location.

As Table 1 shows, sixty percent of the place-names are dedicatory. References to noble personages, such as ‘Lord Kinnaird’ and ‘The Dutchess of Argyll’, account for 54 percent. Several mentions of baronial houses also occur, such as ‘Castle Grant’, alluded to previously. Together, references to nobility and their domiciles account for 61 percent of the place-name titles. Therefore, most of the place-names in collections at this time describe the network between the nobility and the professional musicians *cum* music collectors. They indicate those parts of Scotland that were known to Anglo musical society.

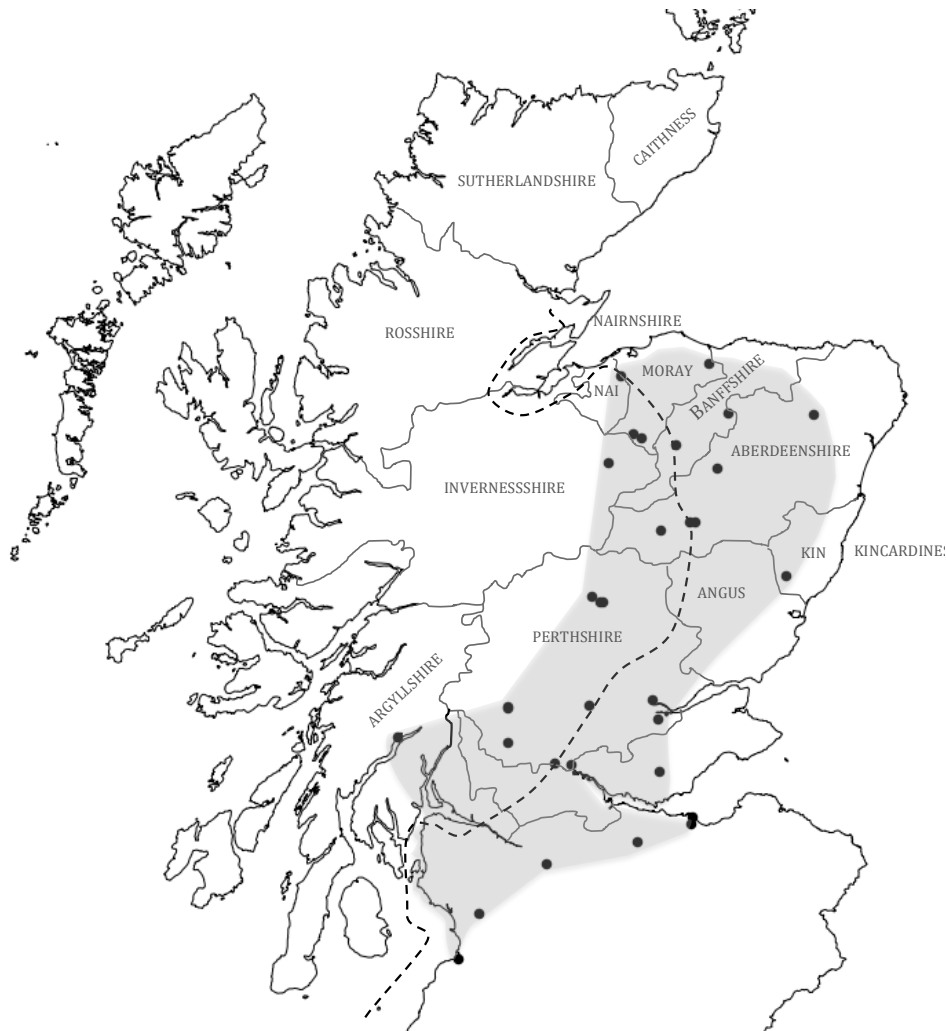
Figure 2: Place-names in tune titles 1700–1749



The black dots in Figure 2 represent the place-names from the first half of the eighteenth century (i.e. 1700–1749). Also represented are the River Spey and its main tributaries, Wade’s primary roads into the Highlands, and the border of the Gaelic-speaking region (the ‘Highland-line’) in 1745 (Withers 1984: 66). Grey shading indicates the total area represented by the place-names, comprising a limited geographical zone that arcs northeast from the central belt to the Morayshire-Banffshire coast. This ‘intercultural zone’ runs parallel to the Highland-line over most of its length, and protrudes roughly fifteen miles into the Gaelic-speaking region at its greatest extent. The strong correlation between the western boundary of the ‘intercultural zone’ and the Highland-line indicates that it is, essentially, a linguistic boundary. The language barrier and lack of roads, as mentioned previously, explains why leisured Anglo society and music collectors had yet to acquaint themselves with the region west of Nairn and north of Inverary. Turning to Strathspey, consider the

cluster of four points on the Gaelic side of the Highland line and lying within the Spey valley region. This is the densest such cluster on the map and from it, we can gather that Strathspey was a significant intercultural zone even before the conclusion of the Forty-Five. This is unsurprising, given the number of nearby burghs (e.g. Inverness, Nairn, Elgin and Fochabers), which had been at least partly English-speaking since the Middle Ages (Withers 1984: 21): they must have exerted linguistic pressure on the area. In all, it is clear that Speyside was already on the musical map of Scotland in the period preceding the first mention of the strathspey, whereas most of the Highlands were not. Musical intercultural contact is likely to have occurred in Strathspey in the first half of the 1700s, based upon this data.

Figure 3: Place-names in tune titles 1700–1749 with parish boundaries and the Highland-line

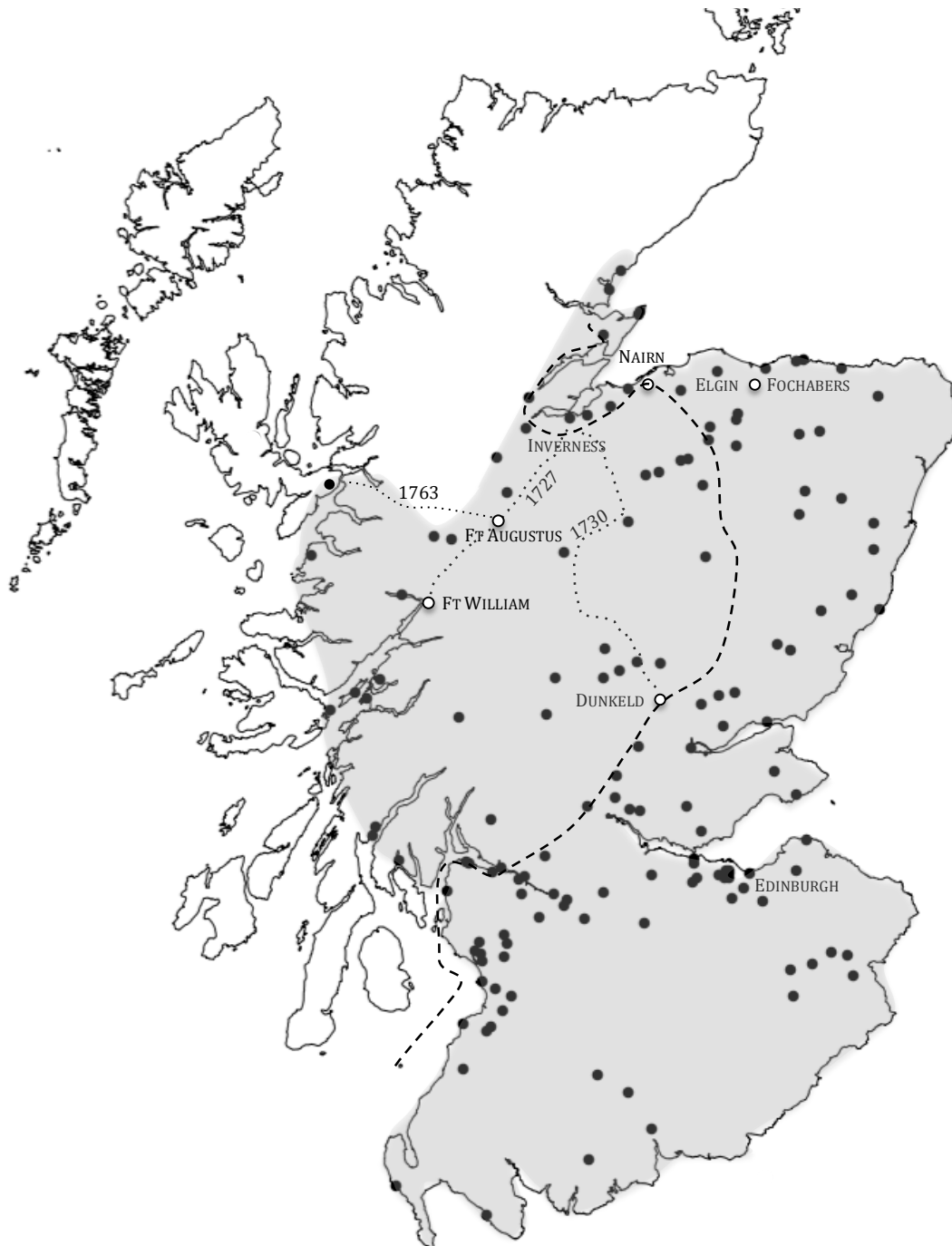


When looking at the same points plotted on a parish map (Figure 3), we find one point each in Inverness-shire and Argyllshire, but none in Ross-shire, Sutherland, Caithness or the Hebrides. It appears that most of the *Gàidhealtachd* in the middle of the eighteenth century was unknown to Anglo musical society. If those areas had been more accessible – and consequently available for intercultural contact – perhaps the strathspey would be better known to us today as the ‘Ross-shire Reel’, the ‘Skye Fling’ or the ‘Sutherland’.

Figure 4, on the next page, plots the place-names appearing in tune titles between 1750 and 1783. It shows the expansion of the intercultural zone over much of the Highland region and throughout Scotland, in general. Presumably, this expansion was due to the greater mobility

afforded by Wade's roads, as well as the growing interest in dance music and music publishing. Although this map includes areas such as Skye ('Isle of Sky', Bremner 1757) and Mull ('Miss Maclean of Duart', Dow 1775), most of Ross-shire, Sutherland and the Hebrides, as far as we can tell, remained obscure to musical collectors and their gentry sponsors.

Figure 4: Place-names in tune titles 1750-1783



The place-names of eighteenth century fiddle tunes provide us with evidence of intercultural contact in Speyside in the time leading up to the recognition of the strathspey as a type of music or dance. Armed with a knowledge of the roads available and the position of the Highland-line, we get the impression that the Spey valley area was accessible to Anglo musical society. We see the

geographical extent of this intercultural contact, as well as its absence over many other parts of the Highlands. While intercultural contact took place in Strathspey in the first half of the eighteenth century, it would not occur with any vigour in the far north of the Highlands for many years. The Lowland *literati* would have accepted the notion that the strathspey rhythm had been devised in Strathspey *prima facie*. Once the strathspey *qua* tune type had been popularised, the new moniker would have swallowed up earlier dance-song airs featuring the rhythmic meme. They would have become ‘strathspeys’ overnight, as it were. Eventually, many Gaelic speakers would have forgotten their origins in Gaelic song, and outsiders would have never perceived this in the first place. We have all the makings of a folk-etymology.

Conclusions

The strathspey is a paradox. As a type of instrumental music, it shares traits of Gaelic and Anglo culture alike. By conceiving the strathspey as culture graft, rather than monogenetic invention, we can account both for its origins in an earlier tradition of Gaelic movement song and its conventionalisation as a classically influenced variety of instrumental music. Our analysis of the place-names of fiddle tune titles shows that Strathspey was in the right place, and at the right time, as it were, for culture graft to have occurred. Additionally, we see that Wade’s roads and the burgeoning interest in Scottish dance music provided the conditions necessary for the musical form to be popularised, and its association with Strathspey reinforced. Key to all of this was the arrival of the European violin.

Although we will never know the exact developmental path taken by the strathspey as it evolved into the tune type that we recognise today, perhaps it resembled the following: Sometime in the latter half of the 17th century, Gaelic-speaking musicians in Strathspey began playing dance-songs¹⁸ on the newly-arrived modern violin. The violin was available to them due to Strathspey’s culturally peripheral status and the presence of musically-interested gentry in the area. In instrumentalising their songs, the Gaelic-speaking fiddlers responded to the opportunities afforded by the violin, as well as the classical aesthetic and technique that followed it.¹⁹ Anglo gentry – or dance musicians in their employ – took notice of the resultant tunes and some aspects of Strathspey traditional dance, and the resulting form became popular in haute society as an alternative to the common Reel. The rhythmic meme, to borrow Hans Naumann’s term (in Nettl 2005: 331), could be seen as a case of *gehobenes Kulturgut* – a form that travels from a lower to a higher status group. One might say, along the same line, that the modern violin and the classical aesthetic that followed it are a type of *gesunkenes Kulturgut* (*ibid.*) – the adoption of a prestige form by a lower status group. However, the most economical way to regard the strathspey is as culture graft. The term implies the dominance of one culture over another, which I think is accurate in this case. The evolution and diffusion of the strathspey *qua* tune type was a product of the Anglo musical sphere, although its roots are in a form of Gaelic tradition that preceded it and co-existed with it for many years.

Culture graft could have occurred in the Highlands in earlier periods as well. Indeed, Allan MacDonald’s thesis could be seen in this light. He maintained that pibroch (*ceòl mòr*), the classical music of the pipes, was once more integrated with song and that modern renditions of pibroch are

¹⁸ Michael Newton (2013) argues that social dances such as the reel, and their associated musical forms, could not have existed amongst the peasantry in the *Gàidhealtachd* prior to the diffusion of a ‘package’ of French court culture to them via the Gaelic-speaking gentry. Although available space and time preclude a detailed assessment of this viewpoint here, I believe it is reasonable to assume that an earlier dance-song tradition – obscure to us due to the limitations of our record – informed these developments rather than being obliterated by them.

¹⁹ Or, perhaps, it was first ‘codified’ by classically-trained musicians, who imparted their conceptions of proper aesthetics and technique through their notated representations.

rhythmically bereft due to a break in oral tradition. With Gaelic musical culture so strongly vocal in nature, would it be surprising if all of its instrumental traditions were once based upon, or inextricable from, pre-existing song traditions? Unfortunately, when researching oral cultures, our capacity for diachronic precision is limited. As Sachs says, ‘In all probability, the first songs to be instrumentalised are those for which the words have been forgotten’ (1937: 181). However, once we have fully traced the intricate web of Gaelic music, we may well find a centre spun of song.

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