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Traditional Gaelic Bagpiping, 1745-1945. By John Gibson. (Edinburgh: NMS Publishing Ltd. and Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998. Pp. 424, ISBN: 0-77352-134-8)
Old and New World Highland Bagpiping. By John Gibson. (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002. Pp. 456, ISBN: 0-77352-291-3)

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In these two books John Gibson makes a consistent argument that highland bagpiping in Canada and Scotland is rooted in and supported by Gaelic society and tradition. In his studies, he focuses on the genealogy of pipers and their teaching within families, as well as their skills and techniques.

The first, *Traditional Gaelic Bagpiping, 1745-1945*, develops two major themes in the story of Scottish Gaelic bagpiping. It is the story of how pipe music changed from before the Battle of Culloden and the Disarming Act of 1746. It is also about the role of pipe music and pipers in the context of the community and the military. In developing these themes, the author exposes us to several parts of the story critical to understanding bagpipe music, such as the transmission of the musical form and the prevailing standards of performance, historical teachers and their methods, the rise of a literate form of pipe music, and the social and military status of pipers. The book ends with a sensitive analysis of the role of the community piper in Gaelic Nova Scotia.

The second volume, *Old and New World Highland Bagpiping*, builds nicely on the first. It develops the position of musicians within community and stratified societies in both Scotland and Nova Scotia. Gibson does not apologize for what appears as an overdependence on genealogy. The method of musical transmission and, occasionally, technique, is revealed through biographical and genealogical material. As he says in his foreword, to appreciate this musical tradition one must be aware of the details of kinship because in Gaelic society kinship explains much about what people do. Nonetheless, his desire to clarify relationships sometimes leads to a convoluted narrative style that detracts from his main points.

Underpinning both books is a huge body of research which seems almost exhaustive. Letters, diaries, acts of Parliament and, arguably most important, genealogies and personal interviews, are intertwined and lead to discoveries about the music and its context. Gibson's

interpretation of this material is, at least in part, motivated by the need to explain some of the wrong-headed notions about piping and how it has changed, and he does not hesitate to point out how misconceptions about the music have arisen. He is also keenly aware of how sparse some of the evidence is, particularly for the earlier periods, and is cautious not to conclude too much from too little.

In his first book Gibson discusses at length the supposed English suppression of piping through the post-Culloden Disarming Act of 1746. He springboards this point into a discussion of the use of bagpipe music in the military in the eighteenth century, and its further relationship to Gaelic society through traditional dancing and celebrations.

The discussion moves to the repertoire of civilian and military pipers during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, just prior to the first publication of pipe music. These chapters are among his most engaging as he weaves the story of teaching with playing *ceòl mór* (the highly structured pibroch) and *ceòl beag* (the little music, or marches and dance music).

Gibson devotes considerable space to the development of piping contests, the effect of highland games and competition piping. It was, he explains, the influences of highland cultural organizations in London and Edinburgh that were catalysts for the demise of Gaelic based music. It may be here that Gibson does the greatest service to the understanding of piping as a cultural form. The Highland Societies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and their rigid prescription of what constituted the appropriate forms of music, dance and sport, may have done more damage to the system of learning and playing music, and other cultural expressions, than anything the Disarming Act ever intended.

The last part of the book is a discussion of the rise of literacy in the music, the implications of religious and social interference and the retention of anachronistic forms of piping in the Cape Breton part of the Gaelic diaspora. This is more a lament than a celebration. The decline and virtual disappearance of a vibrant, community based musical form, loss of repertoire and its replacement with a regulated form is certainly regrettable. Nonetheless the current generation of pipers continues to find new ways to enhance the music.

In both books his Gaelic reference is more to the society than the language. Within the frame of highland society, he chronicles who taught,

who learned, who listened and who paid for music. Social context is an important part of Gibson's study, particularly in the second book where the role of the piper and music's value for dancing and occasions among common people is the major theme. In *Old and New World Highland Bagpiping* Gibson tracks the changing form and use of the musical expression, which is no small feat. Despite the huge amount of material combed for this study, the references he discovered are often fleeting and vague. Gibson's skill as a researcher and cross referencing has given us a valuable collection of material that is sure to prompt future studies.

I expected, though, to read more about the system of *canntaireachd* or the vocalization of the music. The reliance upon speaking or singing the notes as a method of teaching the music and defining note clusters is a fascinating art, but Gibson comments on this only in passing.

His exhaustive research and footnotes are a delight to read. Moreover, Gibson has resurrected a vast number of historical pipers who were simply lost in the records. Their identification is a great step to realising the strength of the tradition of piping lies not in its novelty factor, which some cultural historians prefer to focus on, but rather in its role within community. For anyone seriously interested in piping or this element of world music, Gibson's two books will prove essential.

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