

## Piping Reports in the Irish Press

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When I submitted a 250-word proposal for a paper I proposed to deliver at the International Bagpipe Conference in Glasgow in February 2016, little did I know what I was letting myself in for. Several months before I saw the call for papers, I had finally begun to engage with a project, the idea for which I had long been tinkering with; to do a trawl of Irish newspapers starting as far back as I could go to see what coverage – if any – appeared in them about any aspect of the Highland bagpipe. I was really quite surprised by what my initial investigations had turned up and in drafting the proposal for the conference organisers, I submitted the following notes to try and indicate the breadth of material involved:

Even a cursory perusal of the Irish press throughout the period in question will reveal that the bagpipe as an instrument was represented to the Irish reading public in a wide variety of situations and contexts. Some of these range from the utterly serious to the utterly bizarre. We have quite an early reference (*Belfast Newsletter*, August 1792) to the annual competition of the Highland Society of London, which according to the report was held that year in Edinburgh, with judges appointed by the Royal Highland Society ... In September 1786, the writer of a letter to the editor of the *Belfast Newsletter* condemning the practice of taking snuff, asserted that a certain actor 'by this absurd treatment of his nose' had spoiled his voice making it 'as dull and drowsy as the hum of a bagpipe'. The following year, a report in the *Freeman's Journal* (August 1787) tells of a man who was a notorious 'eater' and that, allegedly, 'he had been seen to ingurgitate a bagpipe with all its appurtenances'.

The variety of material lurking in the pages of various publications ranged from the utterly absorbing to the completely unusual and so I began to record any references I came across in a file. These references I hoped to revisit at a later point in order to impose some semblance of order and classification on them. My proposal for a paper at IBC 2016 was accepted and I began to prepare the material. The original intention was to provide a summary overview of the type of material available about the bagpipe or about piping in general in newspapers for the 200-year period 1770-1970 but I soon abandoned any idea of trying to engage with such a long period of time within the restrictions of a twenty-minute paper. I eventually confined myself to the fifty-year period from 1770 until 1820 but even at that, it was clear that I had overestimated what could be achieved.

In any event, there was more than enough material on the day to engage the interest of a very wide and varied audience. Following the paper, one of the questions posed by a member of the audience prompted me to look at an aspect of the material more thoroughly than I had previously done. In the Q&A session, I was asked why I thought that events such as the Highland Society of London's piping competitions should be of such interest that reports of them appeared in Irish newspapers. I had no real answer to that question but decided to examine more closely the kind of

information that was being reported about the competitions themselves with a view to addressing the issue.

In reviewing the various reports, it is important to consider them in the context of the purpose and objectives of the Highland Society of London. Fortunately, this is rather easier than I at first anticipated owing to the work done by Iain MacInnes on the Highland Society of London and the Highland Society of Scotland.<sup>1</sup> The Highland Society of London was founded in May 1778 by a group of influential Scots expatriates in London and membership increased considerably in the following months. Lord Lovat was the first President and John MacKenzie, who was a lawyer with links to the Highlands, became its first Secretary. The initial membership comprised many people from the professional and political classes and MacInnes asserts that ‘... before long the Society was established as a rather exclusive club, attracting Highland chiefs, Parliamentarians and others with landed interests north of the border.’<sup>2</sup> The establishment of the Society came at a time when Gaelic culture more generally and piping in particular was under threat and on the wane, and under the Society’s auspices, an annual piping competition was initiated and organised from 1781 until 1844.<sup>3</sup> It can be argued that one core consequence of the Society’s legacy was to create a firm foundation from which piping, in particular, would grow and flourish. Records pertaining to the work and activities of the Society are held in the National Library of Scotland and include boxes of correspondence, minute books, miscellaneous records and account books.<sup>4</sup> No minutes exist for the period before 1783 or for the years 1834-1855, although gaps may be filled by drawing on the correspondence and other papers from the periods in question. Reports of the activities of the HSL appeared primarily in the *Edinburgh Evening Courant*, the *Caledonian Mercury* and the *Scots Magazine*. These accounts of events were generally written by members of the competition committee (e.g. John Graham Dalyell for the years 1822, 1829, 1835, 1838; the MacDonald of Dalness for 1832 and William Forbes Skene for 1841).<sup>5</sup> Articles describing the activities of the Society appeared in a broad range of newspapers in Scotland, England and Ireland.<sup>6</sup> That these reports were sometimes authored by the same individual from year to year is obvious from the repetition that is evident in them. In some instances, much of the text is almost verbatim although the details (such as the names of prize-winners) change. I propose to look at a selection of reports appearing in the Irish press between 1792 and 1820 with a view to reaching some conclusions about how and why the activities of the Highland Society of London attracted such attention.

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<sup>1</sup> Iain I. MacInnes, ‘The Highland Bagpipe: the impact of the Highland Societies of London and Scotland, 1781-1844’, (M.Litt. Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1988). I am extremely indebted to the author of this thesis for providing much valuable information in relation to the activities of the Highland Societies of London and Scotland.

<sup>2</sup> MacInnes, ‘The Highland Bagpipe’, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> MacInnes, ‘The Highland Bagpipe’, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> MacInnes, ‘The Highland Bagpipe’, p. ix.

<sup>5</sup> MacInnes, ‘The Highland Bagpipe’, p. x.

<sup>6</sup> Irish newspapers which carried references to and reproduced accounts of the activities of the Society were the *Belfast Newsletter*, *Finn’s Leinster Journal*, the *Freeman’s Journal* and the *Kerry Examiner*. The source of the reports of the Highland Society of London’s piping competition in the Irish media was not always cited but from time to time papers such as the *Glasgow Herald*, the *London Gazette* and the *British Mail* are acknowledged as containing the original account.

Among the objectives of the Highland Society of London listed by MacInnes in his dissertation were the following: the restoration of the Highland dress; the preservation of the Ancient Music of the Highlands; the cultivation of Gaelic, and the rescuing of the remains of the valuable Celtic literature; the keeping of the Martial Spirit and rewarding the Gallant achievements of the Highland Corps.<sup>7</sup> The commitment of the Society in striving to achieve these aims and their success in so doing may be seen in these various newspaper articles. The earliest report on the Highland Society of London appeared in the *Belfast Newsletter* in 1792. Entitled 'Bagpipe Competition', it gave a short but quite detailed account of the event. The judges were appointed by the Royal Highland Society in Scotland, as was the practice with the competition, and the event was financed by the Highland Society of London.<sup>8</sup> The chair of the panel was the Marquis of Huntly. Iain MacInnes has noted that from very early on, 'the active interest of Royalty considerably enhanced the Society's prestige.'<sup>9</sup> It is this connection with members of the royalty and with representatives from the professional and landed classes that no doubt provided an added attraction for newspapers outside of Scotland to report on the activities of the Society. The first prize, 'a handsome pipe', was awarded to John Mackay, piper to Mr MacLeod of Rasay, as well as the sum of 40 merks,<sup>10</sup> 'being the usual sum given along with the prize pipe, upon which a suitable inscription is engraved'.<sup>11</sup> The second prize of thirty merks went to Allen Macdonald, from Rannoch; and 'the third, being also 30 merks, was given to John Macgregor, *tertius*, a boy of ten years of age, son of Peter Macgregor, piper to Henry Balneavis of Edradour, Esq. Peter Macgregor, senior, the boy's father, gained the first prize pipe competed for at Falkirk.'<sup>12</sup>

From the outset, attempts were made to broaden the appeal of the competition to a wider range of players. Even in the early years, the committee provided some small recompense to all competitors, as 'the money arising from the sale of tickets was divided among other pipers, to whom prizes were not adjudged'.<sup>13</sup> This plan clearly had the desired effect, as another account in the *Belfast Newsletter* ten years later reported that competitors were 'thirty in number, many of whom from distant parts of

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<sup>7</sup> MacInnes, 'The Highland Bagpipe', p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> MacInnes, 'The Highland Bagpipe', p. 23. The report in the *Belfast Newsletter* on 27 July, 1802 stated that 'The Annual Competition of Prizes, given by the Highland Society of London to the three best performers on the Great Highland Bag-Pipe, was held in the Theatre-Royal here on Tuesday last, in presence of a Committee of Judges appointed by the Highland Society of Scotland and a very numerous and brilliant audience.'

<sup>9</sup> MacInnes, 'The Highland Bagpipe', p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> The merk was a Scottish silver coin. Scottish money was abolished as a circulating currency at the Act of Union in 1707. However, the valued rent of land, and in many places, feu duties and ministers' stipends, schoolmasters' salaries, and other parochial payments were still reckoned by the Scots pound and the merk for some considerable time after the Union. There were 12 Scots pounds to the English pound. The merk was  $\frac{2}{3}$  of a Scottish pound or 13 shillings and fourpence. (See [http://www.thereformation.info/old\\_scottish\\_money.htm](http://www.thereformation.info/old_scottish_money.htm))

<sup>11</sup> *Belfast Newsletter*, 7 August 1792.

<sup>12</sup> *Belfast Newsletter*, 7 August 1792.

<sup>13</sup> *Belfast Newsletter*, 7 August 1792.

the country'.<sup>14</sup> On that occasion, the prize-winners numbered among them members of the Highland regiments: 'The first prize, being a handsome Pipe, properly mounted, and adorned with a silver plate, upon which there has since been engraved the proper inscription, together with forty merks Scots money, was adjudged by the Committee, and the Pipe delivered by Lord MacDonald, their Preses<sup>15</sup>; in presence of the audience, to John Buchanan, Piper Major to the 42d Regiment, or Royal Highlanders. The second prize, being thirty merks, was adjudged to Murdoch Mackenzie, 'Piper to the 92d Regiment, or Gordon Highlanders. And the third prize, being also thirty merks, was voted to Malcom Macgregor, from Glasgow.' It is clear, too, that the aims of the Society to promote piping extended to other aspects of Highland culture and that these were already being catered for by the organisers of the competition, 'as premiums were also given to the dancers of Highland reels'.<sup>16</sup> With the passing of the years, reports appearing in the Irish press illustrate that attention to the promotion of this aspect of Highland culture was gradually accorded greater importance. It was reported in 1806 that 'the audience were also highly entertained with the reels and Highland dances introduced between the acts. The dances were generally encored by the company, and received suitable premiums from the Committee.'<sup>17</sup> The committee also felt that providing a variety of artists to perform at the competition would allow for a wider public interest in the event and in 1806, an Irish piper gave a performance at the event. According to the report, 'to vary the entertainment, Mr Fitzmaurice played several beautiful airs on the union pipe, which were received with great pleasure.'<sup>18</sup> The provision of premiums to those taking part in the piping competition and providing the entertainment between performances was due primarily to increased interest and attendance at the event, as 'from the increased countenance and support which not only those connected with the Highlands but the company in general who were at the races were pleased to give to this annual competition and exhibition the judges were much gratified to find, that from the amount of the receipts at the Theatre, which was larger this year than on any former occasion, with the sum allowed by the London Society, they were enabled to make considerable additions in money to the competitors who gained the first and second prizes, besides making a handsome division among the unsuccessful candidates, some of who had come from a great distance, to encourage them to farther exertions and improvement, in this

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<sup>14</sup> *Belfast Newsletter*, 27 July 1802 and the report was credited to the *London Gazette*. It is worth noting that at the first competition held at Falkirk, thirteen pipers competed before the panel of judges. By 1784, that number had increased to sixteen. See MacInnes, 'The Highland Bagpipe', p. 32.

<sup>15</sup> *Preses* was a Scottish term used for the leading officer (Chairman) of the committee.

<sup>16</sup> *Belfast Newsletter*, 7 August 1792. Iain MacInnes provides in his thesis an extremely interesting account of the evolution of the tradition of Highland dancing at the competition. See 'The Highland Bagpipe', pp 64-7.

<sup>17</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 15 August, 1806. Subsequent reports that appeared in the *Freeman's Journal* of 3 August, 1808 and 17 August, 1810 commented favourably on the entertainment provided by the Highland dancers stating that they had 'displayed great agility and neatness', were 'met with much applause from the company, and received suitable premiums from the Committee.' 'The Strathspey, or Twosome, which was danced in good style by two Highlanders, was highly relished' at the event in 1819 according to a report in the *Freeman's Journal* of 10 August, 1819.

<sup>18</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 15 August, 1806. Richard Fitzmaurice was a renowned Irish piper who published a collection of Irish tunes 'adapted for the Piano Forte, Union Pipe, Flute & Violin' in Edinburgh in 1805.

ancient, warlike and national music, and likewise amongst the dancers of the Highland reels.<sup>19</sup>

The increase in the financial support given to the Society and thereafter to competitors in the piping competition can also be mapped by reviewing the newspaper reports which appeared in the Irish press. By 1810, prizes were awarded to the top five competitors and the increasing value of the monetary prizes is notable: 'The first prize being a handsome pipe, properly mounted, and adorned with a silver plate for an appropriate inscription, together with forty merks Scots money was adjudged to Alan McLean, from Mull. The other prizes, in money, were fixed in amount by the committee and voted as follows, viz.: the second sixty merks Scots money, to John MacGregor, piper to William Farquharson, Esq. of Monaltry; the third, of fifty merks, to Donald MacGregor, piper to the Highland regiment of Perthshire local militia; the fourth, forty-five merks, to John Mackay from Sutherland; and the fifth prize, of forty merks, to James Munro, also from Sutherland.'<sup>20</sup>

The introduction not only of a piping competition but the increase, over a period of years, in the number of prizes available and the monetary value thereof would seem to have effected the desired result. Numbers of competitors increased and, it would appear from the reports provided to the press, a steady improvement in the calibre of player and performance was remarked upon. The first of such comments appeared in a report in the *Freeman's Journal*, where it was observed that 'The improvement made by the performers in general, in consequence of the encouragement given by these annual competitions, was so conspicuous on this occasion, that all the competitors who appeared were very good players. In particular, Donald McNabb, piper to the Laird of McNabb; Finlay McLeod from Glenmorison; John McGregor, piper to the Inverness Shire Militia; and Peter Forbes, from Foss, Perthshire, who had previously gained 2nd or 3rd prizes. These, as well as the preferred competitors, met with the most marked approbation from the company present.'<sup>21</sup>

An interesting aspect of some of the reports is the type of particular mention that appears in them. At the event in 1806, Sir John Sinclair, the Preses, after awarding the prizes to the various winners, 'called for Donald McDonald, late piper to the Caithness Highlanders, now pipe-maker in Edinburgh, and informed him that a prize had been voted to him by the judges, for producing the greatest number of ancient pipe tunes, properly set to music by himself, in which he had discovered considerable ingenuity; and it was recommended to him to continue his exertions in this way and to instruct such other performances, as should apply to him to be taught the method of setting to music the most approved piobrachs and other ancient pieces of Highland music.'<sup>22</sup> Some years later, John MacDonald, (son of Donald MacDonald), 'received a premium for setting to music a selection of ancient pipe tunes and piobrachs submitted by him to the judges'.<sup>23</sup> MacDonald was described as 'a boy' in the report, although his age is not mentioned. Further remarks were made in respect of the

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<sup>19</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 15 August, 1806. Similar reports in the *Freeman's Journal* of 3 August, 1808 and 17 August, 1810 would appear to demonstrate that this trend was sustained.

<sup>20</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 17 August, 1810.

<sup>21</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 15 August, 1806. Reports commenting on the standard of playing also appeared in the *Freeman's Journal*, 3 August, 1808 and 17 August, 1810.

<sup>22</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 15 August, 1806.

<sup>23</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 3 August, 1808.

playing of the competitors and one, in particular, was singled out for honourable mention: 'The competitors who appeared were in general good players and their performances were much applauded by the audience, particularly Allan McLean, who gained the first prize, whose execution was peculiarly excellent, and John and Donald Mac Gregur, who gained the second and third prizes, these being also very superior performers.<sup>24</sup> Such improvement brought its own challenges for the panel of judges, if the report of the 1819 competition is to be believed. The report noted: 'From the excellence of many of the performers, the judges felt much difficulty in deciding some of the prizes. Five of the competitors had formerly gained second prizes, and could only now compete for the Prize Pipe as the highest premium.' The prizes were finally awarded but the excellent performance of one piper not in the prize-list was acknowledged by an additional award: 'Kenneth Logan, late pipe-major to the 71st regiment, a very superior performer, and who had gained 2d and 3d prizes at previous competitions, had several votes in the Committee for the prize pipe. It was therefore with peculiar satisfaction that the Judges felt themselves enabled on this occasion, to notice his merits, by voting him a new annual prize, placed at their disposal through the liberality of Mrs. H. Siddons. ... The prize was an elegant Highland *sporan* or purse, of the finest material, with gold tassels, a silver plate, and inscription.'<sup>25</sup> This prize is also indicative of the interest the Society showed in promoting the national dress of Scotland as part of its ongoing advancement of Highland culture.

## Conclusion

Having examined a range of reports about the Highland Society of London's piping competition in the Irish press during the period in question in this short essay, it is impossible to identify any real pattern to the reproduction of these in the Irish press. They were not included every year, for example, but they still appear with significant regularity, suggesting that they were deemed to be of sufficient interest to the readership of the newspapers drawing on them. The considerable coverage of the Society's activities by the *Belfast Newsletter* is not surprising, given the strong links between Ulster and Scotland since the first Scottish settlers began arriving there in the early 1600s and the many cultural connections that existed between the two. The connections of the Highland Society of London and the Highland Society of Scotland to the respectable and professional classes of society would also provide reason enough for them to be included as newsworthy items. Other particular references such as the appearance of Irish musician, Richard Fitzmaurice, at the competitions would account for the Irish readership's interest in the news item. Aside from this, the rise of interest in antiquarianism across Ireland, Scotland and England in the latter half of the eighteenth century and in the nineteenth century is likely to have been sufficient reason for those involved in the print media to reproduce such reports. There were many people among the cultured and educated classes who would have had an interest in the activities of associations like the Highland Societies of London and Scotland. In relation to the groundswell of interest in such activity MacInnes argues that at the piping competition in Edinburgh in 1787, 'there were six hundred in the audience; in 1835, over fifteen hundred. Where did they come from? At the broadest level, we can point to the prevailing literary romanticism of the period which

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<sup>24</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 17 August, 1810.

<sup>25</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 10 August, 1819.

undoubtedly contributed to the popularity of a 'National Exhibition' of this kind, bringing as it did the Romantic Gael, with his music and dance, onto the Edinburgh stage.<sup>26</sup> In Ireland, The Royal Irish Academy, for example, was established in 1785 and gatherings of harpers for music festivals were being organised in Longford in the early 1780s. Other organisations in Ireland associated with cultural revival, the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland and the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, for example, were founded in 1849 and 1877, respectively, and are further manifestations of the appeal such associations had for the general public interest.

Finally, in relation to the piping competitions, a remark made by the Chairman of the Committee, Sir John Sinclair, at the event in 1813, provides another interesting reason to account for the broader geographical interest in events in Scotland. In commenting on the lower numbers of competitors that year, he stated: 'Another circumstance has also tended to diminish the number of competitors at this time. A rule has been fortunately established for interchanging the militias of England, Scotland, and Ireland, in consequence of which our Scotch corps of militia are guarding Cork and Portsmouth, and other places of consequence in our sister kingdoms, whilst two most respectable corps from England, (the counties Norfolk and Northampton), and the gallant sons of Antrim, in Ireland, are garrisoning the metropolis of Scotland. This system of interchange is much to be approved of, for it will extinguish any remnant of ancient prejudice, and will soon cordially unite, by affection as well as by law, three nations, formerly under distinct Governments, but now consolidated into one great empire.'<sup>27</sup> There are many other references to the bagpipe in the Irish press of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and what has been examined here represents only the tip of the iceberg. Much work still remains to be done to collate and analyse these references with a view to arriving at a deeper understanding of the piping heritage which is so widely and so deeply embedded in our common culture.

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<sup>26</sup> MacInnes, 'The Highland Bagpipe', p. 39.

<sup>27</sup> *Belfast Newsletter*, 6 August, 1813.