



*Lowland Piper*



*Highland Piper*



*Irish Piper*

# HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE SCOTCH BAG-PIPE.

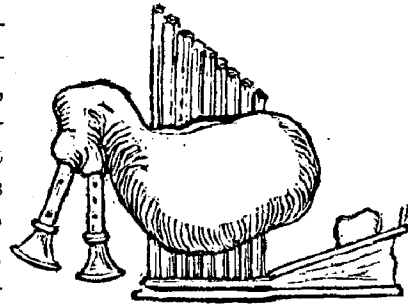
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"In nothing they're accounted sharp  
Except in bag-pipe and in harp."

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*Clelland.*

**T**HERE can be no doubt that the bag-pipe, in one form or another, is of great antiquity; and it seems to have been familiar, from the earliest ages, to almost every nation in Europe. It is represented on ancient coins, and on pieces of Grecian and Roman sculpture. It appears, for example, on a coin of Nero's, of which we give a cut, reproduced from Montfaucon's Antiquities. Two separate instruments are, we think, here grouped together—a primitive organ and a bag-pipe; but we leave the reader to form his own opinion as to this. Nero himself, according to Suetonius, was a performer on the instrument; and it is mentioned that, when the Emperor heard of the revolt by which he lost his



empire and his life, he made a solemn vow that, if it should please the gods to extricate him from his difficulties, he would perform in public on the bag-pipe—an entertainment of which the public were deprived by the event. In the sixth century it is mentioned by Procopius as the instrument of war of the Roman infantry, while the trumpet was that of the cavalry. The bag-pipe is said to have been a martial instrument of the Irish Kerns, or infantry, as far back as the reign of Edward III., and to have continued as such down to the sixteenth century. It is said to have been known to the ancient Germans, and that it was popular at a comparatively recent period is attested by numerous old prints. It seems to have been a favourite instrument with the English. Oxford College received from William of Wykeham, in 1403, a beautiful silver-gilt crozier set with precious stones, having an angel playing the bag-pipe, among other figures embellishing it. Chaucer's miller played upon it:

"A bag-pipe well couth he blowe and sowne."

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In the fine old song, written during the reign of James I. (of England), and which contrasts the glorious times of Queen Elizabeth with those of her degenerate successor, we are told the old English gentleman had a good old custom when Christmas was come,

“To call in his old neighbours with bag-pipe and drum,”

Shakespeare has several allusions to it. He talks of the “drone of a Lincolnshire bag-pipe,” and of silly people (whose breed is not yet extinct) who “laugh like parrots at a bag-piper.” From the accounts of the Lord High Treasurer we see that English bag-pipers used to visit the Scotch Court. On the 10th July 1489 there is a payment of “eight shillings to Inglis pyparis that came to the castle yet and playit to the King.” In 1505 there is another payment to the “Inglis pipar with the drone.”

Whether the bag-pipe originated in Scotland, with which it is now almost exclusively associated, or whether it was introduced, and, if so, when and by whom there is no evidence to show. To these questions, as to many others of equal importance, history returns no answer. Where curiosity is strong and facts are few the temptation to conjecture is well-nigh irresistible. In this as in almost every other field of human enquiry they are abundant. The following may serve for examples:—

In his “Essay on the Influence of Poetry and Music on the Highlanders” P. Macdonald refers to a tradition existing in the Hebrides that the bag-pipe was introduced by the northern nations, whose Viceroys governed these islands for at least two centuries, and that from the Hebrides a knowledge of the instrument spread to the mainland.

Mr Pennant, in his “Tour through Scotland,” allows that the

Danes or Northmen may have improved the instrument; but asserts that the Scotch received it from the Romans, who again were indebted for it to the Greeks. Others affirm that the latter, although reluctant to give strangers the credit of valuable inventions, acknowledge their obligations to the barbarians (*i.e.* Celts) for music and musical instruments; whilst others, to make “confusion worse confounded,” think it might have been communicated to the Scots by the Britons or Welsh, who probably acquired it from the Romans—all of which, and some other learned and contradictory conjectures, just land us where we began, *viz.*, that whether the bag-pipe originated in Scotland, or was imported from some other country, there is no *data* to show.

Certain it is that wherever the seed may have come from, it has fallen on congenial soil—that the instrument has attained in Scotland a perfection it has reached nowhere else, and given birth to a rich and varied stock of music such as no other country can boast of—music specially adapted for, and that can be properly executed on, no other instrument but the bag-pipe. That it has been known in the Highlands from a remote antiquity is highly probable; and, although it may seem strange that no allusion is made to it in the early accounts that have come down to us of sanguinary battles fought by our ancestors, it is equally strange that the introduction of an instrument that has been so deeply appreciated, and has exerted such a powerful influence, should be left unnoticed; and the more recent the introduction the more extraordinary the omission.

The Scotch bag-pipe has been unfortunate in the circumstance that the only historians in remote times, both in Lowlands and

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Highlands, were its jealous foes. The clergy, who acted in that capacity in the Lowland portion of the Kingdom, were the bitter enemies of the minstrels, whom they considered as satirical rivals and intruders, who diverted from the church the money that might have been devoted to more pious and worthy uses. They talked of them as "profligate, low-bred buffoons, who blew up their cheeks and contorted their persons and played on harps, trumpets, and pipes for the pleasure of their lords, and who, moreover, flattered them by songs, tales, and ballads, for which their masters are not ashamed to repay these Ministers of the Prince of Darkness with large sums of gold and silver and rich embroidered robes." This clerical animosity to pipers is still testified by the sarcastic carvings on various old churches, &c.; for, as is well known, the monks were not only the historians but the architects and sculptors of those distant ages. In the Highlands, the seannachies and bards (the jealous rivals of the pipers) were the sole historians—hence almost the first notice of the grand, although unfortunate, instrument in either division of the country is satirical.

Aristides Quintillanus mentions that the bag-pipe prevailed from the earliest times in the Highlands of Scotland. Giraldus Cambrensis, who wrote in the twelfth century, when William the Lion was King, bears remarkable testimony to the excellency of the Scottish music. He says, "In Scotland they use three musical instruments, viz., the harp, the tabour, and the bag-pipe" (*choro*\*).

\* The proper meaning of this word is a matter of dispute amongst the learned. That bag-pipe is the correct translation seems, however, to be clearly proved by William Dauney, Esq., in his Introduction to "Ancient Scottish Melodies." Ed. 1838.

The bag-pipe carved in bas-relief on Melrose Abbey,\* founded in 1136, confirms the statement that the instrument was known in Scotland at that period; for, even on the unpatriotic and unwarranted assumption that the old sculptors were foreigners, it is very unlikely that they would select subjects that would not be understood by the people.

James I., who was assassinated in 1436, is said to have been a proficient in music, and a performer on a variety of instruments, including the bag-pipe. In the poem, of which he is the undoubted author, called "Pebblis to the Play," it is twice mentioned:—

"The bagpype blew, and thair out threw  
Out of the townis untald.  
Lord! sic ane schout was thame amang,  
Quhen thair were ower the wald."

And again—

"With that Will Swane come sueitand out,  
Ane meikle miller man;  
Gif I sall dance have donn lat se  
Blaw up the bagpyp than," &c.

It would appear as if the bag-pipe was not employed by the Highlanders for purposes of war until the beginning of the 15th century. Previous to this date the armies were incited to battle by the *prosnacha*, or war song, of the bards. With the discovery and general use of gunpowder, and its accompanying din, they probably found at least a part of their occupation gone, and the irrepressible bag-pipe was substituted. A *prosnacha*, repeated at the battle of Harlaw in 1411 by Macmluirech, is said to be still

\* See tail-piece.

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extant, and the last that was recited in battle. This Macmhuirech, who was bard to Donald of the Isles, also wrote a satirical poem on the bag-pipe and its lineage, in which he vented his disgust, in "verses more graphic and humorous than gentlemanly and elegant,"\* against the powerful instrument that had stepped into his shoes.

Dr Leyden, in his Introduction to the "Complaynte," maintains that there is no direct evidence that the bag-pipe was known at an early period to the Highlanders, and adds that the earliest mention of the instrument's having been used in the Highlands is at the battle of Balrinnies in 1594. He afterwards quotes from the Banantyne MS. an unpublished poem by Alex. Hume, minister of Logie in 1598, on the defeat of the Armada. The lines:—

" Caus nichtelie the weirlie nottes breike  
On Heiland pipes, Scottes and Hybernicke."

It will be seen, however, from the evidence of Macmhuirech, that the bag-pipe was in use, even in war, nearly two centuries before.

George Buchanan, in the Introduction to the History of Scotland, which treats of the manners and customs of the Western Islands, says that they (the natives) use, instead of the trumpet, the great bag-pipe.

At the close of the 15th century the bag-pipe seems suddenly to have jumped into general favour; or, what is more probable, information on it and many other subjects becomes more abundant. We find it established as a regular institution in every town in Scotland. From numerous entries in the accounts of the Lord

\* Vide "A Treatise on the Language, Poetry, and Music of the Highland Clans," &c., by Donald Campbell, Esq., Edinr. D. R. Collie & Son. 1862.

High Treasurer of Scotland, of payments to pipers, we select the following:—

Item, Payment to the Piparis of Aberdeen, in the year 1497,	xviii s.
Oct. 6, 1503. Item to the commoun piparis of Aberdeene,	xxviiij s.
The first day of Januar. Item to the commoun piparis of Edinburgh,	xxiiij s.
Feb. 24. Item that samyn nicht in Bigar to ane pipar and ane fithelar be the Kingis command,	xiiij s.
1505, The xiiij day of Aprile. Item to the tua piparis of Edinburgh, the Franch quhissalur, the Inglis' pipar with the drone, ilk man, ix s,	xxxvj s.

Dunbar, (the Poet Laureate of James IV.,) in his verses "To the Merchants of Edinburgh," which give some graphic glimpses of Edinburgh at the end of the fifteenth century, grumbles that the city minstrels can only play twa tunes, viz., "The day daws" and "into June"—the former, now called "Scots wha hae," being still a favourite air on the bag-pipe.

John Knox, in his History of the Reformation, says that the image of St Giles, having been cast into the North Loch, another was borrowed from the Greyfriars, for a procession in honour of his anniversary, led by the Queen Regent, and accompanied by bag-pipers and other musicians. This occurred about 1556.

Amongst burgh pipers was the family of Hasties, who were the hereditary pipers of Jedburgh for upwards of three hundred years. The last of the line died about the beginning of the present century. Dr Leyden mentions having seen the pipes of John Hastie, about the year 1795—the same set that his ancestor bore to the battle of Flodden.

The office of burgh piper was generally hereditary. About

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spring time and harvest the town pipers were wont to make a tour through their respective districts. Their music and tales paid their entertainment, and they were usually gratified with a donation of seed corn. They received a livery and small salary from the burgh; and, in some towns, were allotted a small piece of land, which was called the piper's croft. The office, through some unaccountable decadence of taste, was gradually abolished.

The magistrates of Aberdeen prohibited the common piper from going his rounds, in these terms, "26 May 1630. The Magistrates discharge the common piper of all going through the town at nycht, or in the morning in tyme coming with his pype, it being an uncivill forme to be usit within sic a famous burgh and being often fund fault with als weill be sundrie nichtbours of the toun as be strangers." This instrument, Dauneay thinks, must have been the great Highland bag-pipe. "Critically speaking," he adds, "the sounds which it emits are of a nature better calculated to excite consternation than diffuse pleasure." We agree with him in the inference, although we dislike the mode in which he draws it.

The name of James Munro, piper to the burgh of the Canon-gate, appears in the account of the competition held at Falkirk Tryste, in 1783, under the patronage of The Highland Society.

At what period bag-pipers were added to the tails of Highland chiefs is beyond traditionary or other record. The clan, like the burgh, pipers seem to have been hereditary. The most celebrated piper of whom we have any authentic notice is Eain Odhar, or dun-coloured John, one of the family of Mac Crummens, hereditary pipers to Mac Leod of Macleod. His son and successor, Donald Mór, or big Donald, became eminent at an early age for his per-

formance of pibrochs. The reputation of the Mac Crummons was so great that no one was considered a perfect player who had not been instructed or finished by them. Donald Mór was succeeded by Patrick Og, and he by Malcolm, and the latter by John Dubh—the last of this celebrated race of pipers, who died in 1822, in the 91st year of his age. It is told of him that, when the infirmities accompanying a protracted life prevented him handling his favourite piob-mhor, he would sit on the sunny braes and run over the notes on the staff, which assisted his feeble limbs in his lonely wanderings. A descendant of the Mac Crummens, a female, who kept a school in Skye, is said to have been able to go through the intricacies of a pibroch. Hugh Robertson, Pipe Maker in the Castle-Hill, Edinburgh, who flourished in the last century, had a daughter of still greater talent and accomplishments, for she could both make and play the bag-pipe.

The Mac Arthurs, who filled the important office of pipers to the Mac Donalds of the Isles, were esteemed next in excellence to the Mac Crummens; and, like them, kept a seminary for instruction in pipe music. Pennant, who visited the Hebrides in 1774, describes the collegiate edifice as being divided into four apartments—the outer being for the shelter of cattle during winter; another formed the hall where the students appear to have practised; a third was set apart for strangers; and the fourth was reserved for the family. In former times it was the custom for gentlemen to send their pipers for instruction to the celebrated masters, paying the cost of their board and tuition. Six to twelve years were devoted to the acquirement of Piobaireachds alone, for the professors would not allow reels or quick-steps to be played in their establishments.

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The author of "Certayne Matters," writing in 1597, says, "The armour with which they (the Highlanders) covered their bodies in a time of war is an iron bonnet, and halberzion side almost even ith their heels; the weapons against their enemies are bows and rows; they fight with broad swords and axes; in place of a drum they use a bag-pipe," &c.

The functions of the piper were alike important and multi-arious. It was his duty to cheer the clansmen on their long and ainful marches, to rouse their courage and lead the van into battle, to alarm them when in danger, to collect them when scattered, to seal to memory the heroism of their ancestors, and to incite them, y passionate and martial strains, to imitate their glorious example. In peace he gave life and merriment to the wedding; and, in wild vailing notes, expressed the general woe at a funeral.

It is related that, during an engagement in India, in which the Macleod Highlanders, (at that time the 73d Regiment,) led the attacks, the attention of General Coote was particularly attracted by one of the pipers, who always blew up his most warlike sounds whenever the fire became hotter than ordinary. This so pleased the General, that he cried aloud, "Well done, my brave fellow, you shall have a set of silver pipes for this." The promise, it is added, was not forgotten, and a handsome set of pipes was presented to the regiment, with an inscription in testimony of the General's esteem for their conduct and character.\* The same author narrates that General Coote, on another occasion, particularly noticed

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\* Colonel David Stewart's Sketches of the Highlanders and Highland Regiments. Vol. II., p. 136. Edinburgh. 1822.

the animated manner in which the piper played, and the effects produced on the minds of the men by the sound of their native music. Previously to this he had no very favourable idea of this instrument, conceiving it a useless relic of the barbarous ages, and not in any manner calculated for disciplined troops. But the distinctness with which the shrill sounds pierced and made themselves heard through the noise of the battle, and the influence they seemed to excite, effected a total change in his opinion.

James Reid, who had acted as piper to a rebel regiment in the '45, suffered death at York on the 15th November 1746. On his trial it was alleged in his defence that he had not carried arms; but the Court observed that a Highland Regiment never marched without a piper, and therefore his bag-pipes, in the eye of the law, was an instrument of war.\*

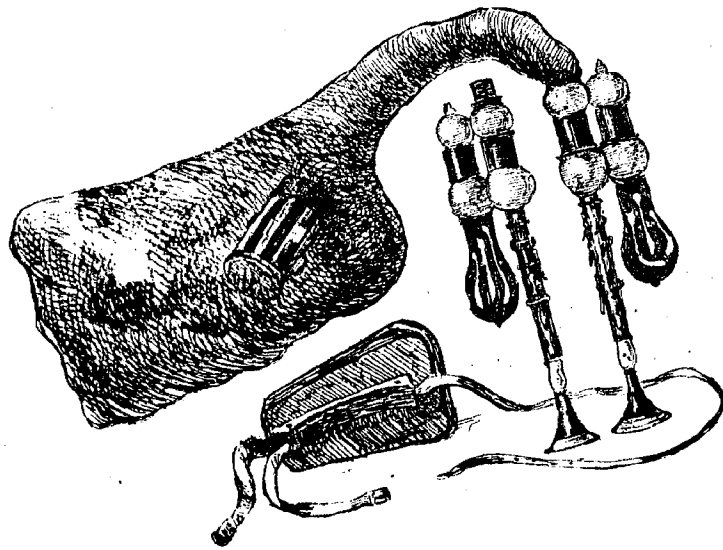
At Highland weddings it is mentioned that "during the whole day the fiddlers and pipers were in constant employment. The fiddlers played to the dancers in the house, and the pipers to those in the field. †

The last funeral at which a piper officiated in the Highlands of Perthshire was that of the famous Rob Roy, who died in 1736. It may be mentioned that James M'Gregor, the son of the celebrated cateran, performed on the pipes; and that, when an exile in Paris, in the year 1754, and without "subsistence to keep body and soul together," and about a week before death kindly came to his relief, he penned an epistle to his patron, Bohaldie, of which this is the postscript:—

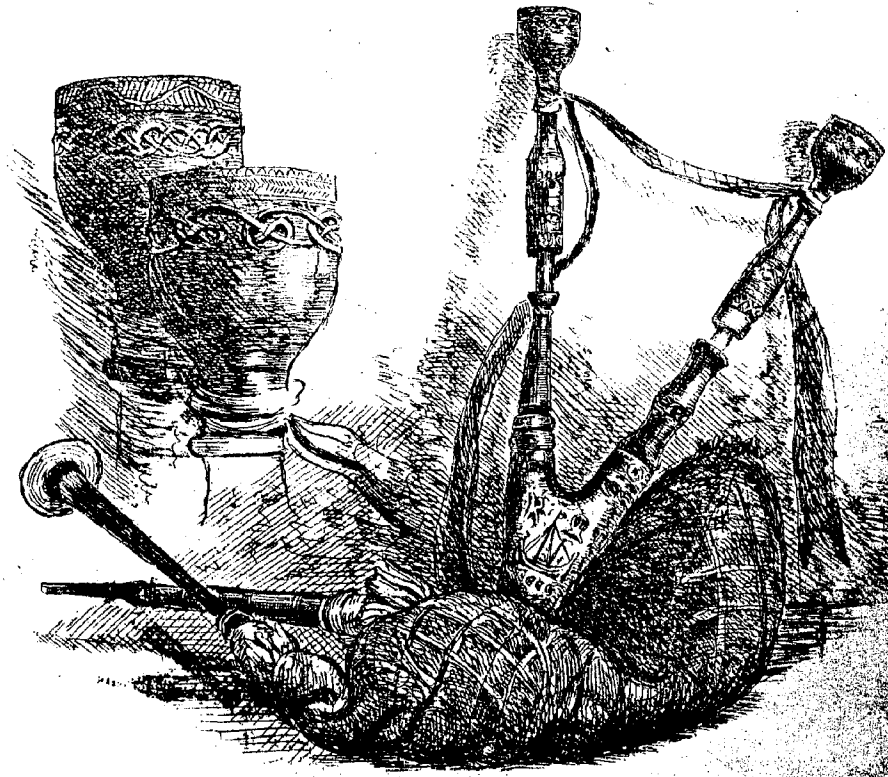
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\* Scots Magazine. Vol. V., 8, p. 543.

† Stewart's Sketches. Note G in Appendix.



*Set of Pipes that belonged  
to Prince Charles Edward.*



*Ancient Highland Pipes, having the date 1809 carved on the Stock,  
in the possession of Mess<sup>rs</sup> J&R Glen.*



"P.S.—If you'd send your pipes by the bearer, and all the other little trinkims belonging to it, I would put them in order, and play some melancholy tunes, which I may now with safety, and in real truth. Forgive my not going directly to you, for if I could have borne the seeing of yourself, I could not choose to be seen by my friends in my wretchedness, nor by any of my acquaintance." \*

When Lord Lovat—of whom it may be said in the words of Shakspeare:—

" . . . nothing in his life  
Became him like the leaving it; he died  
As one that had been studied in his death  
To throw away the dearest thing he owed,  
As 'twere a careless trifle."

—was taken prisoner, he made the piper play before him on the journey. He said he had ordered by his will that all the pipers from John o' Groat's to Edinburgh should be invited to play before his corpse, for which they were to receive a handsome allowance; "but, as things were, the old women would sing the coronach for him, and there will be crying and clapping of hands, for I am one of the greatest chiefs in the Highlands."

On the death of Mr Mac Donell of Glengary, in 1828, "a large concourse of clansmen (about 1600) assembled to pay the last sad duty to their chief, and were plentifully regaled with bread, cheese, and whisky. . . The coffin was borne breast-high by eighteen Highlanders, who relieved each other at regular intervals. The chief mourner was the young chief of Glengary, (the only surviving son of the late Mac Mhic Alasdair,) dressed in the full Highland garb

\* Introduction to Rob Roy. (By permission of the Publishers.)

of his ancestors, with eagle's feathers in his bonnet, covered with crape. Some hundreds of the people were arrayed in the Highland garb. The mournful Piobaireachd, (composed by Archibald Munro as a last tribute to his master,) was wailed forth by six pipers, and none of the formalities usually attending on the obsequies of a chief were omitted." \*

It seems worthy of mention that Prince Charles Edward, whose bold and nearly successful enterprise eventually occasioned such a revolution in the Highlands, was a performer on the pipes, and that the instrument he used is now in the possession of Mrs Stewart of Sweethope. It was purchased for her grandfather, Mr Richard Lees of Galashiels, about 60 years ago, at a sale of the effects of the Cardinal of York, brother of Prince Charles Edward Stuart, in his villa of Frescati, near Rome, after his decease. It was sold as having belonged to Prince Charles. Sir Walter Scott, to whom Mr Lees showed it, took a characteristic interest in the relic, and stated that the bag-pipe was an instrument of which the Prince was fond, and that it was a fact that he was possessed of several sets.†

After the battle of Culloden all the peculiar customs of the Highlanders were overthrown; and, with their arms and garb, the bag-pipe was for a long time almost completely laid aside. In this interval much of the music was neglected and lost, so that, afterwards, when the internal commotions of the country had completely subsided, and the slumbering spirit and prejudices of our countrymen awakened under the new order of things, the principal records

\* Note to Aonghus Mac Aoidh's Collection of Piobaireachd.

† See Illustration.

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f our ancient Piobaireachd were the memories of those patriarchs who had proudly sounded them at the unfortunate rising.

Until very recently music for the bag-pipe was not written according to the usual system of notation, but was taught by a language of its own which attempted to describe the sounds by words. \*Captain Macleod of Gesto, or Gesto, published twenty pieces in that peculiar tongue, which he had obtained from the dictation of noted performers. The following is the introduction to the gathering of the clans in that collection:—

“ Hodroho, Hodroho, haninin, hiechin,  
Hodroho, Hodroho, Hodroho, hachin.”

The Highland professors recited their musical vocabulary in a whining tone, which must have sounded strangely to the uninitiated.

A folio volume written in this jargon was brought to Edinburgh in 1818 by John Campbell, an aspirant at the competition then held in that city. He possessed two other volumes, said to contain numerous compositions; but the contents seemed like a narrative written in an unknown tongue—bearing no resemblance to Gaelic. One Murdoch Maclean, a pipe maker, Glasgow, likewise a candidate, offered to decipher it; but, receiving no encouragement, the owner refused to part with his volume.

Donald Macdonald, Pipe Maker, Edinburgh, published a collection of Piobaireachds in 1806, set according to the regular notation, being about the first pipe music that had been so committed; for which work he was awarded a prize by The Highland Society in the same year.

\* Capt. Neil Macleod's collection of Piobaireachd. Edinburgh, 1828.

From the year 1781 until recently, competitions were held at Falkirk, and latterly in Edinburgh, under the auspices of The Highland Society, for the encouragement of the music of the great Highland bag-pipe, and prizes are still awarded to pipers at the different games and gatherings throughout the country.

Many of those who write on Scottish History, when they have occasion to mention the music or musical instruments of the nation, describe the bag-pipe in use as of three kinds, viz., the Highland, the Lowland, and the Northumbrian. In the foregoing pages we have made no such distinction, believing that the three instruments so distinguished are essentially the same. The scale of all is alike. The only difference between them is in size; the Highland pipes being the largest, the Lowland or Border pipes a medium, and the Northumbrian the smallest. It does not materially alter the character of the instruments that the Highland is inflated by a blow-pipe, and the two others (as also the Irish) by bellows. The different modes of inflation necessitates, for the convenience of tuning, a different adjustment of the drones—the latter in the Highland pipes resting on the left shoulder and arm, where they can be easily reached by the right hand which is at freedom—whereas, in the Lowland and Northumbrian pipes, the drones, projecting from one stock, repose on the right arm or thigh, so as to be accessible to the right hand that is confined by the bellows. The disparity in size, the position of the drones, and the two methods of inflation have no doubt led the superficial observer to consider them as three different instruments. It may be proper to explain that by Northumbrian, we do not mean the modern instrument, which has a chanter closed at the end, and furnished with keys to

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increase the scale and to provide semi-tones, but the ancient one. The error alluded to may have been confirmed by a propensity at one time in vogue amongst pipers, especially of those who used the bellows, of attempting to raise the compass by pinching out notes not natural to the instrument; and, from the fact that in music printed for the Highland pipes no signatures are used, or indeed required, the nine tones it possesses being invariable, whereas the signatures of various keys were used for the others; but the music could only be performed correctly by avoiding C and F natural; and, as occasionally the music was written a fifth lower than that for the Highland pipes, consequently the transposition affected F natural and B flat. But, notwithstanding these apparent differences, the three instruments are essentially the same—the scale and fingering being exactly alike. The scale of the bag-pipe approaches most nearly to the key of A major—with this difference in its intervals. The low G and its octave being the flat seventh, but rather sharper than G natural. The C is not a full semi-tone sharp, and D is slightly sharp. Chanters have a different pitch, of course, according to size.

Dr Leyden mentions that the bellows were introduced about the end of the 16th century. It is usually assumed that they are an improvement on the blow-pipe; but this is a matter of taste, and, as the reeds require to be more delicate, they are deficient in power. A writer in the *Encyclopædia Britannica* states that the Lowland pipes were improved by George Mackie, who went for instruction to the College in Skye; but, if the instrument he used was different from the Highland pipes, he would have gone there to no purpose. He made no improvement on the Lowland pipes whatever; but he returned with a great improvement in his style of playing, having studied and adopted the method of interposing appoggiaturas, or warblers—the great charm and difficulty of pipe music.

It is not our intention in this brief history to treat of any bag-pipe except the Scotch; but we may mention in conclusion that the Irish bag-pipe is entirely different. The same may be said of the Italian—a barbarous instrument in comparison with either the Scotch or Irish—in fact it seems to have undergone no improvement since the days of Nero.



From a Cast in the possession of James Drummond, Esq., R.S.A.