The Pibroch Repertory: Some Research Problems

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THE PIBROCH (derived from Scots Gaelic *pìobaireachd*, 'piping') is an extended composition in theme and variation form for the Scottish Highland bagpipe. Pibrochs comprise a category of Gaelic music known as *ceòl mór*, 'great music', as opposed to the repertory of *ceòl beag*, 'small music', or dance tunes, song airs and military marches.

Various writers describe the pibroch repertory as the classical music of the bagpipe; if one is to understand the meaning of the term 'classical' in this context, a comparison with some non-European classical music may be helpful. Powers writes of southern Asian music:

> To be deemed 'classical' and authentically representative of the 'great tradition', a South Asian performing art must satisfy two criteria: first, it must establish a claim to be governed by authoritative theoretical doctrine. Second, its practitioners must be able to authenticate a disciplined oral tradition of performance extending back over several generations[1]

He adds that an authentic master—disciple succession is a *sine qua non*—that an artist must have learned from a master who himself has a reliable pedigree. But although the standing of an artist depends on his reputation for his devotion to music, on his knowledge, and on his performing skill, the artist need not be a professional in the sense of one earning his livelihood through his art.

There are several parallels here with the pibroch tradition. Until the middle of the 18th century there were several schools of piping in the west Highlands of Scotland, and traditions suggest that the period of instruction was long and rigorous. Even today the pedigrees of teachers are considered important, and frequent competitions serve to maintain high technical standards of performance. As in southern Asia, the tradition is no longer completely oral: a written body of theory dates from around 1762, and since 1800 more than 420 different pibrochs (ninety per cent of them dating from before that time) have been recorded on paper, some in multiple variants. Yet, despite this stamp of classical respectability, the pibroch tradition has been largely ignored by our Western academies, even those in Scotland, and the work of documentation has been left almost entirely to amateur enthusiasts and the pipers themselves. There is a consequent dearth of reliable historical information and competent musicological analyses. Gaelic culture never had a literary tradition, and apart from occasional references, mostly disparaging,

[1] Harold Powers, 'India, Subcontinent of', I, 2 (ii), *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, sixth edition (London, forthcoming)

to the pipes by Gaelic bards[2], only in the last two centuries has there been any documentation at all. There is no shortage of traditions and legends associated with the repertory: they circulate in present-day oral tradition and are preserved in pibroch collections assembled by pipers. But they need to be collated and evaluated.

One important exception is at the same time the earliest reliable description of the pibroch repertory Joseph MacDonald's *Compleat Theory*, written in approximately 1762, gives some idea of the role of the piper:

> The original design of the bagpipe . . was to animate a sett of men approaching an enemy and to solemnise rural diversions in fields and before walking companys To play amidst rocks, hills, valleys and coves where echoes rebounded and not to join a formal regulated concert There are rural compositions for the pipe as well as martial which are abundantly sweet in their style[3].

Of that section of the repertory called 'the gatherings' he adds:

> These are the most animating of pipe compositions, as they were originally intended to assemble the highlanders under their respective chiefs upon any emergency, and indeed they answered the purpose, being very well adapted for it. Every chief had a gathering for his name, which are so full of life and fury, that no music can be more animating

The actual sound of such performances can, of course, only be surmised.

Other writers seem gushingly romantic. Donald MacDonald, for example, writes in his preface to the first published collection of pibrochs:

> In halls of joy and in scenes of mourning it has prevailed It has animated her warriors in battle and welcomed them back after their toils to the homes of their love, and the hills of their nativity.[4]

He continues, in similar vein, to praise the power of the pipes to raise the spirits of men in far-off lands and among the carnage of battle-fields. Nevertheless, these sources, together with the texts of 17th and 18th-century Gaelic poetry, and other accounts, show that the piper played an important role in war and in Gaelic ceremonial at least until the middle of the 18th century.

When one turns to the repertory notated by 19th-century pipers, one finds that the nomenclature used for the pieces is confused or absent. For example, a pibroch dedicated to MacDonald of Kinlochmoidart is termed a Lament in some sources and a Salute in others. The number of such examples lends

[2] Finlay MacNeill and Jake A MacDonald, 'Ceol Mor and Gaelic Song', *Proceedings of the Piobaireachd Society Conference* (1973), 48–65; Alexander John Haddow, 'The Mackay Tunes—the Story of some Sutherland Piobaireachd', *Proceedings of the Piobaireachd Society Conference* (1974), 42–51.

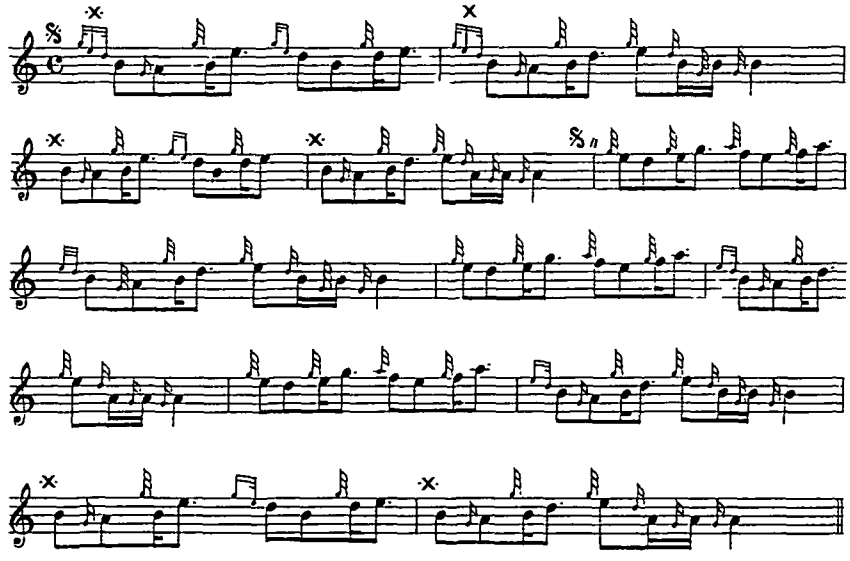
[3] Joseph MacDonald, *A Compleat Theory of the Scots Highland Bagpipe* (*c.* 1762), Edinburgh University Library, MS La. 3. 804.

[4] Donald MacDonald, *A Collection of the Ancient Martial Music of Caledonia called Piobaireachd* (Edinburgh, 1822)

weight to the suggestion that the tradition suffered a serious setback in the middle of the 18th century, particularly following the battle of Culloden (1746), in the period of the Disarming Act when the pipes were regarded as instruments of war[5]. There is also a confusion of traditions surrounding many of the earlier pibrochs, and this may be the reason why Thomason, an enthusiastic amateur who died in the early 20th century in military service in India, described his historical notes as 'legends'[6].

Linked to the problem of the nomenclature is one of tonality. Today some pipers maintain that the differences between laments, salutes or marches lie simply in expression and tempo. Thus if one terms *MacDonald of Kinlochmoidart* (ex. 1) a salute it must be played as a salute, if a lament, as a lament, or in other words more slowly, and sadly (whatever the latter term may

Ex. 1 'Failte Fir Cheannlochmuideart' : Angus Mackay's manuscript setting of the *urlar* (theme) of *MacDonald of Kinlochmoidart's Salute*
(National Library of Scotland, MS 1681, i, 173)



(The notes F and C are each approximately a semitone sharp, but this is not shown in pipe notation; the symbol X refers to the g-e-d 'cadence', )

[5] The effect on piping of this period is discussed in detail by Donald MacDonald, op cit., preface, J P Grant, 'Canntaireachd', *Music & Letters*, vi (1925), 54–62, Major-General Charles Simeon Thomason, *Ceol Mor. a Collection of Piobaireachd, as Played on the Great Highland Bagpipes* (London, 1900), and *Ceol Mor Legends*, Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS 3749 (*c* 1900) The question is further reviewed by Peter Cooke, 'Problems of Notating Pibroch', *Scottish Studies*, xvi/1 (1972), 41–59.

[6] *Ceol Mor Legends*, op. cit. This unpublished manuscript was to have accompanied the author's published collection of *ceòl mór*

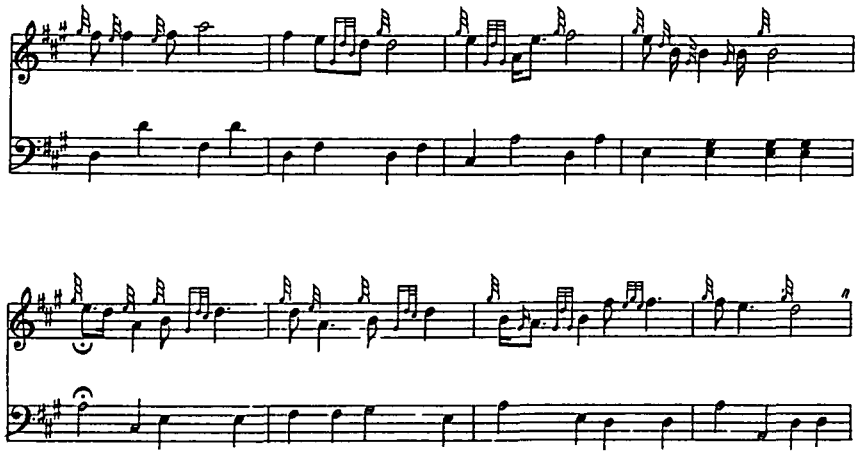
mean). Joseph MacDonald, however, devotes a whole section of his *Theory* to keys, or what he calls 'tastes'. He comments, for example, that 'the Key for Laments excludes C altogether because it is sharp', and discusses six different keys or tastes:

A the key of 'most martial' marches

G: a key or taste for rural pieces (but one which rarely uses high G and never high A). He adds, however, that 'a diversity of this Key' using high G is also possible for rural pieces

A: a key 'inclining towards D' and omitting the note C, which is another key for rural pieces and laments, *e. g Mackintosh's Lament* (ex. 2)

Ex. 2 First 'line' of Var. 1 of *Mackintosh's Lament*, from Angus Mackay, *A Collection of Ancient Piobaireachd* (1838), 162



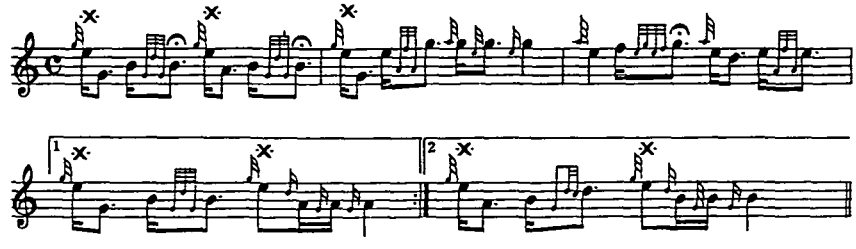
(Mackay's editor adds a bass, ignoring drone tonality and regarding the tune as in D. The key signature is wrong, only F and C being sharp in the bagpipe scale)

E. a key which is another possibility for laments; *MacDonald of Kinlochmoidart* (ex 1) falls into this category (MacDonald quotes the *Lament for Rory MacLeod* but calls it a 'species' of G since 'in the running [variations] the force of the style lies on the lowest G')

G, as a lament: a key which, from the unidentified example he quotes, seems to be characterized by a leap to and a stepwise descent from a high G. The *Lament for Patrick Og Mac Crimmon* (ex. 3) is a better-known example of it

A/G a key 'where C and G are singularly applied' (*i.e* where both C♯ and G occur in prominent positions). He says of this style: 'There is no style more martial', and gives as an example part of the pibroch known today as the *Lament for the Viscount of Dundee.*

Ex. 3 First line of the *urlar* of the *Lament for Patrick Og MacCrummon*, from Angus Mackay (1838), 82



(X indicates E 'cadences' (see ex. 4))

All these 'modes' are employed in the pibroch repertory, and it may be possible in future to straighten out some of the confusion in the nomenclature by a musical and statistical analysis of a large number of early pibrochs. Although MacDonald suggests that each key had a particular flavour, this must not be confused with the particular 'colouring' attributed to different keys in European art music, for in all his keys the drones sound the note A constantly as a system tonic. In the various *maqam* and *raga* systems of the Middle East and southern Asia, the drones also serve as tonic pedals for the respective systems, and, as in Scotland, it is possible to establish tonalities whose 'tonics' differ from the drone pitches. This consideration helps to discount the idea that the more uncommon pibroch tonalities are no more than an extreme development of the 'double tonic' element characteristic of much other Scottish instrumental music.

Unfortunately, by the middle of the 18th century the pibroch tradition was old and decaying. In 1778 Dow described his collection of 'Ports, Salutations, Marches and Pibrachs' as 'ancient' music[7], and Joseph MacDonald referred in the past tense to an art 'originally taught by the first masters and composers in the islands of Skye and Mull . . . the whole carefully collected and preserved in its ancient style and form'[8]. New fashions were coming in from the south. Drone-style music was being replaced, at least in the houses of the gentry, by the harmonies of mainstream European high culture. Early fiddle collections testify, as Johnson has shown, to the kind of musical quandary in which the Gows and other fiddle music publishers found themselves as they attempted to cope with both modern harmonies and the drone technique[9]. But Johnson hardly touches on the Highland pipes and their single bourdon style—for acoustical reasons the most conservative of all Scottish styles. The two types of music were incompatible: although there were experiments with

[7] Daniel Dow, *A collection of Ancient Scots Music for the Violin, Harpsichord or German-Flute* (Edinburgh, 1778)
[8] Op. cit. (n 3).
[9] David Johnson, *Music and Society in Lowland Scotland in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1972), 159.

multiple-drone bagpipes such as Lowland pipes, such pipes never became established, and the Highland pipes survived alone, more and more an anachronism. Pipers were disquieted by this incompatibility: Joseph MacDonald devoted a section of his *Theory* to a discussion of the 'proper style of this instrument', and Donald MacDonald is clearly on the defensive in his preface.

One can argue that from 1781, the date of the first piping competition sponsored by the Highland Society, the old repertory was transferred from the Gaelic Highlands into a new but nevertheless highly conservative social context. Important factors in this development were the demise of the clan courts and their associated piping schools; the introduction of piping competitions in the Lowlands[10]; the recruitment of pipers into the British Army or to serve as personal pipers to Lowland gentry[11]; and the assembling of the first staff-notated collections of pibrochs (*e.g.* the Highland Society of London's manuscript, and Donald MacDonald's book[12]), which increased in importance as the habit of oral transmission weakened.

At the beginning of the 19th century, there were various styles of playing, derived from the teaching of at least three, and possibly more than three, 'colleges' of piping: those of the MacCrimmons (pipers to MacLeod of Dunvegan), the MacArthurs (pipers to the MacDonalds of Skye) and the Rankins (related to the MacDonalds, and pipers to the MacLeans of Mull) During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, however, the influence of the MacCrimmon school, as supposedly passed on by the Mackays of Raasay (John and his son, Angus), became predominant, and two sub-styles, MacPherson and Cameron, are said to have emerged from that single stream of tradition

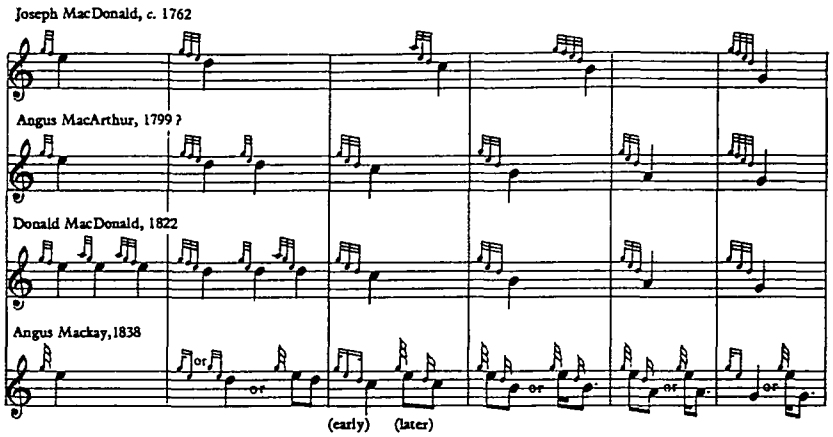
Yet most of the early source material is derived from the MacArthur/MacDonald traditions. When Joseph MacDonald referred to Skye and Mull, the MacArthurs and Rankins were possibly foremost in his mind, and the musical examples in his *Theory* appear to bear the MacArthur/MacDonald stamp. The manuscript of the Highland Society of London, compiled at the request of that society, contains Angus MacArthur's pibrochs; and Donald MacDonald's book ran to five editions. A highly important manuscript collection notated in *canntaireachd* (syllabic notation) and compiled by Colin Campbell in approximately 1799 also possibly reflects the MacArthur style[13]. Not before MacLeod of Gesto's small collection of twenty-eight pibrochs published in *canntaireachd* in 1828, and Mackay's book of 1838, does one find

[10] Angus Mackay, *A Collection of Ancient Piobaireachd or Highland Pipe Music* (Edinburgh, 1838)
[11] David Murray, 'Piping in the Army', *Proceedings of the Piobaireachd Society Conference* (1975), 1–28
[12] The Highland Society of London (Angus MacArthur) manuscript (*c.* 1799), Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS 1679: Donald MacDonald's manuscript, compiled at Edinburgh in 1826, National Library of Scotland, MS 1680.
[13] The Nether Lorn (Colin Campbell) manuscript (*c.* 1799), Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS 3714–15.

the MacCrimmon style supposedly represented[14]. Furthermore, the 1880 publications of Glen and MacPhee seem both to have been responses to Mackay's book, and are essentially restatements of the MacArthur/MacDonald way of notating pibrochs[15].

Exx. 4 and 5 illustrate two features in which the contrast of styles is apparent, at least on paper. One is, in pipers' terminology, the playing of

Ex. 4 'Introducuons' or 'cadences' to melody notes of pibrochs



'echoing beats' on the note A, and the other is the playing of E 'cadences' or, as Joseph MacDonald aptly terms them 'introductions':

> The introductions which frequently occur, being noted down before each passage, seem to a stranger wild and rude, but will appear otherwise when known, being well applied to the style The learner must always be used with these introductions until he can introduce them properly of his own accord, if he has any taste or genius, without which no kind of music can be well taught him[16].

Ex. 4 shows a variety of 'introductions' used in the MacDonald/MacArthur collections, compared with those of Mackay. The latter mostly used one type (the g-E-d 'cadence'), and habitually regarded the central note E as an appoggiatura, though usually writing it as if it were a melody note. Ex. 5 shows the openings of two pibrochs where g-E-d 'introductions' are used in combination with beats on the note A.

[14] Captain Neil MacLeod, *A Collection of Piobaireachd or Pipe Tunes* (Edinburgh, 1828), Mackay, op cit. (n 10)
[15] David Glen, *A Collection of Ancient Piobaireachd* (Edinburgh, 1880–99), Donald MacPhee, *A Collection of Piobaireachd or Highland Bagpipe Music* (Glasgow, 1880).
[16] Op cit.

Ex. 5 Two pibroch openings featuring 'introductions' combined with beats on A

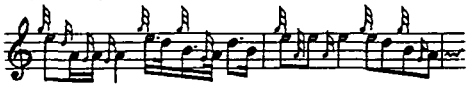
a. MacDonald/MacArthur style

b. Mackay style

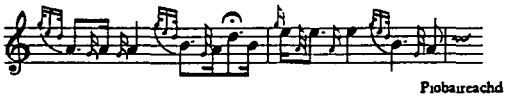
LAMENT FOR DONALD OF LAGGAN

J. MacDonald (*c.* 1762)

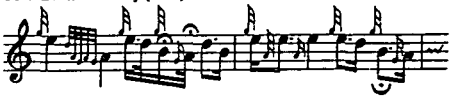
Angus Mackay's MS, ii, p.94



G F. Ross (1926)

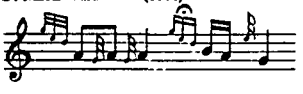


Piobaireachd Society (1939)

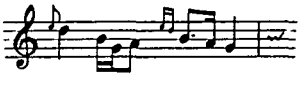


MACLEOD'S SALUTE

D. MacDonald's MS (1812)



E. J. Ross's MS (1813)

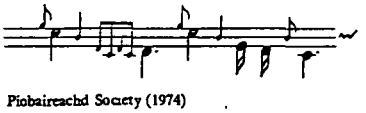


D Glen (1880-99)

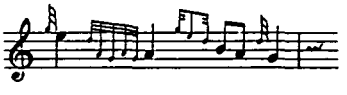
Angus Mackay (1838), p 39

Andantino

R. Ross (1959-)



Piobaireachd Society (1974)



(Donald MacDonald's manuscript shows a less consistent treatment of introductions and beats on A than is prescribed in his book. It seems likely that his book is more truly representative of the MacDonald style than the manuscript, which was planned as Book 2 and is likely to be a compilation from a variety of sources and hence styles)

Joseph MacDonald usually omitted the 'introductions' when he quoted pibroch themes, however, apparently regarding them as optional and

certainly treating them as no part of the melody itself. In the MacArthur/MacDonald tradition the first A is always long, but in the Mackay tradition it is shown as short (because its notated time has been stolen by the E 'introduction'); in modern publications it is reduced to a grace note.

R. Ross's setting, though in a somewhat unconventional notation, is nevertheless a fairly accurate representation of the playing of the late Calum MacPherson, grandson of the famous Calum *piobaire* MacPherson who, near the end of the 19th century, was regarded as a leading exponent of the Mackay tradition[17]. The notation of Elizabeth Jane Ross, later Baroness D'Oyley, is quoted because she lived at the home of MacLeod of Raasay, there became a close friend of MacLeod's piper, John Mackay, and was admired for her playing of pibrochs on the keyboard instrument on Raasay[18]. She notated four pibrochs in 1812 as keyboard realizations[19], but her evidence does little to reveal how the Mackays actually played such formulaic openings, except that the E in each 'introduction' seems always to have been treated as an anacrusis and not as an accented note, as Mackay notated it. This is particularly obvious in the second half of the first bar of *MacLeod's Salute*. The difference in notation between the two traditions—MacArthur/MacDonald and Mackay—may be an exaggeration of the musical differences that prevailed at the beginning of the 19th century, but as far as such pibroch openings are concerned, and in many other respects, only the second tradition is recognized today.

The ultimate fate of the MacArthur/MacDonald style remains an intriguing problem; much relevant data as yet unknown may well survive to elucidate it. One might subtitle this section 'he who pays the piper calls the tune'. Angus Mackay became piper to Queen Victoria: this was the plum of piping appointments, and it may be no coincidence that by the end of the 19th century his pupils alone were accepted by the Establishment (the British Army and aristocratic patrons) as guardians of the tradition.

In the early 20th century, the newly-formed Piobaireachd Society, which formerly consisted essentially of Army officers, lairds and professional men, eventually adopted representatives of this same school as official pibroch instructors, and printed its own pibroch settings for competition use[20], though not without protest from isolated pipers as far afield as Australia and Canada about the ruination (as they saw it) of the tradition. The books of G.F. Ross are one example,[21] and the correspondence columns of the *Oban Times* from about 1910 until about 1930 provide many more, of the protests of certain pibroch devotees who felt unable to accept the dictates of the

[17] Roderick Ross, *Binneas is Boreraig* ['Melody and Boreraig'], I-V (Edinburgh, 1959--)
[18] Angus Mackay, op. cit. (n. 10), 7
[19] Elizabeth Jane Ross, *Original Highland Airs Collected at Raasay in 1812*, Edinburgh University, School of Scottish Studies, manuscript without shelfmark
[20] The Piobaireachd Society, *Piobaireachd*, I (Glasgow, 1925)
[21] George F. Ross, *Some Piobaireachd Studies* (Glasgow, 1926); *A Collection of MacCrimmon and Other Piobaireachd* (Glasgow, 1929).

Piobaireachd Society, whose influence, through its highly prescriptive editions of pibroch and its weight on the judges' bench at competitions, was all-powerful. Field research today has discovered only one piper, George Moss, of Kessock near Inverness, who clings to what he regards as the 'true' tradition and long ago opted out of competitions so that he could continue to play in a style exemplified above as the MacDonald/MacArthur style. But even he maintains that it is a MacCrimmon style—the true MacCrimmon style—and efforts to prove a connection by other orally transmitted data or other documentation have so far proved unsuccessful. One can only add that his MacDonald way of handling 'cadences' and 'echoing beats' makes attractive musical sense to the writer who, it must be admitted, is neither a Gael nor a piper.

The last representative of the Rankin tradition of Mull seems to have been a certain John Johnston of Coll, who died earlier this century. He intrigued Seton Gordon with a unique style of playing 'introductions', namely by tumbling quickly down to the low notes of the melody from a high G, as in the 'introductions' of Joseph and Donald MacDonald. Earlier, the Rankins had emigrated in large numbers to the west coast of Cape Breton Island, the area around Mabou.

Several interesting problems thus confront the student of the present-day pibroch tradition. One has already been discussed: the musical effect of increasing reliance on noted sources on the performance of pibrochs[22]. Another is the influence of competition judges on a musical tradition which survives almost solely (in public at least) in the competition halls.

The last and to me the most fascinating question of all concerns the motivation of those who become pibroch performers. They do not do so merely out of a nostalgic or ideological attachment to Scottish Gaelic culture, nor in order to gain prestige from successful public competition within an exclusive group. One piper stresses the great technical challenge of the instrument; another, Robert Fries, an orchestral horn player in the U.S.A., admits to a kind of addiction to the instrument, in which the rich tonal spectrum of the three drones sounding so close to the player's ears and the overall volume of sound produced play no small part. The sustained melodic beauty of some pibrochs is a powerful attraction. The inadequate notation of other pibrochs presents a challenge: to fashion meaningful musical phrases from the formulas, tuition must be sought where possible from acknowledged masters, a variety of settings must be compared, competitions must be attended and in the last resort the performer's own musical imagination must be invoked, based on an experience of the tradition.

[22] Cooke, op. cit. (n. 5).