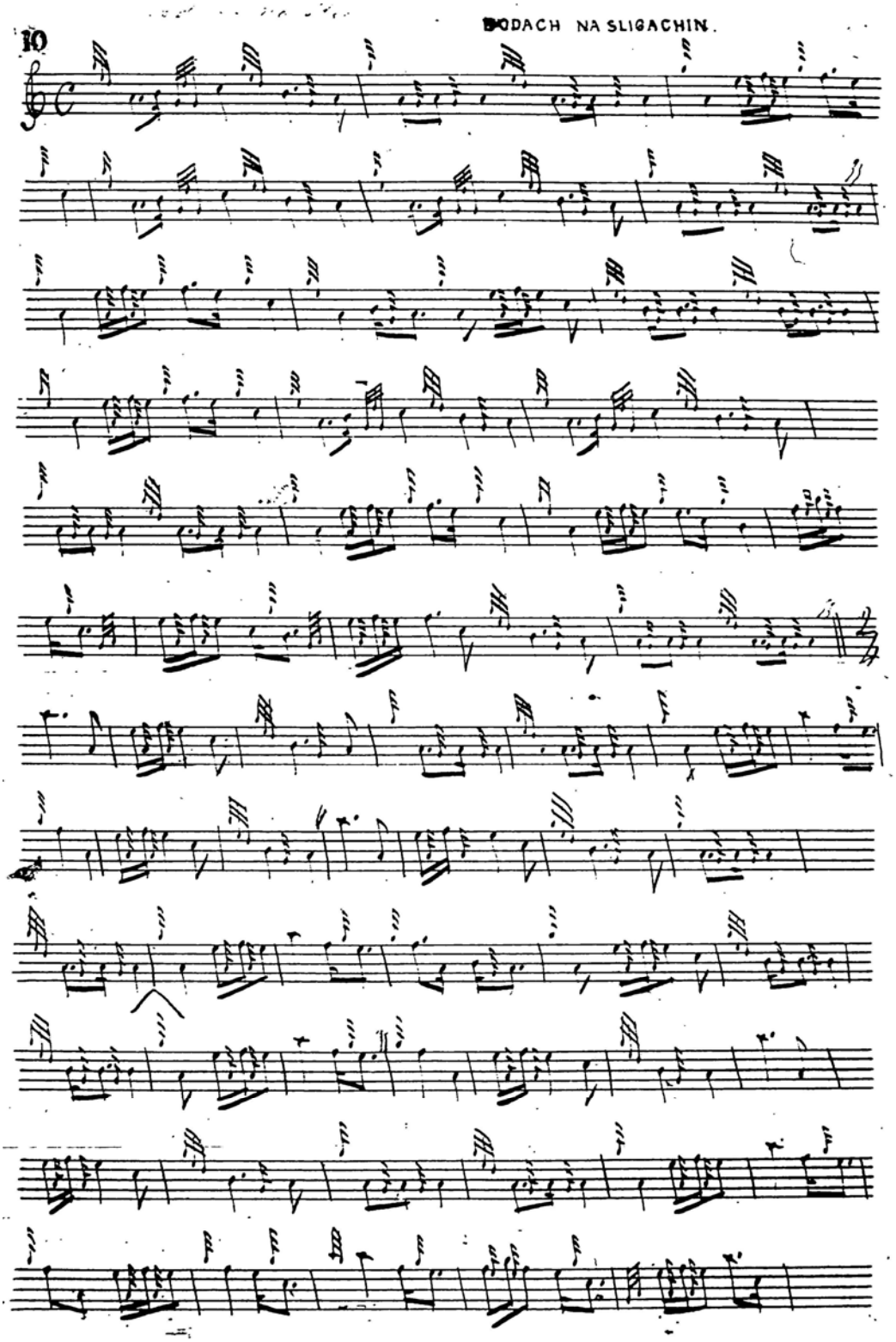
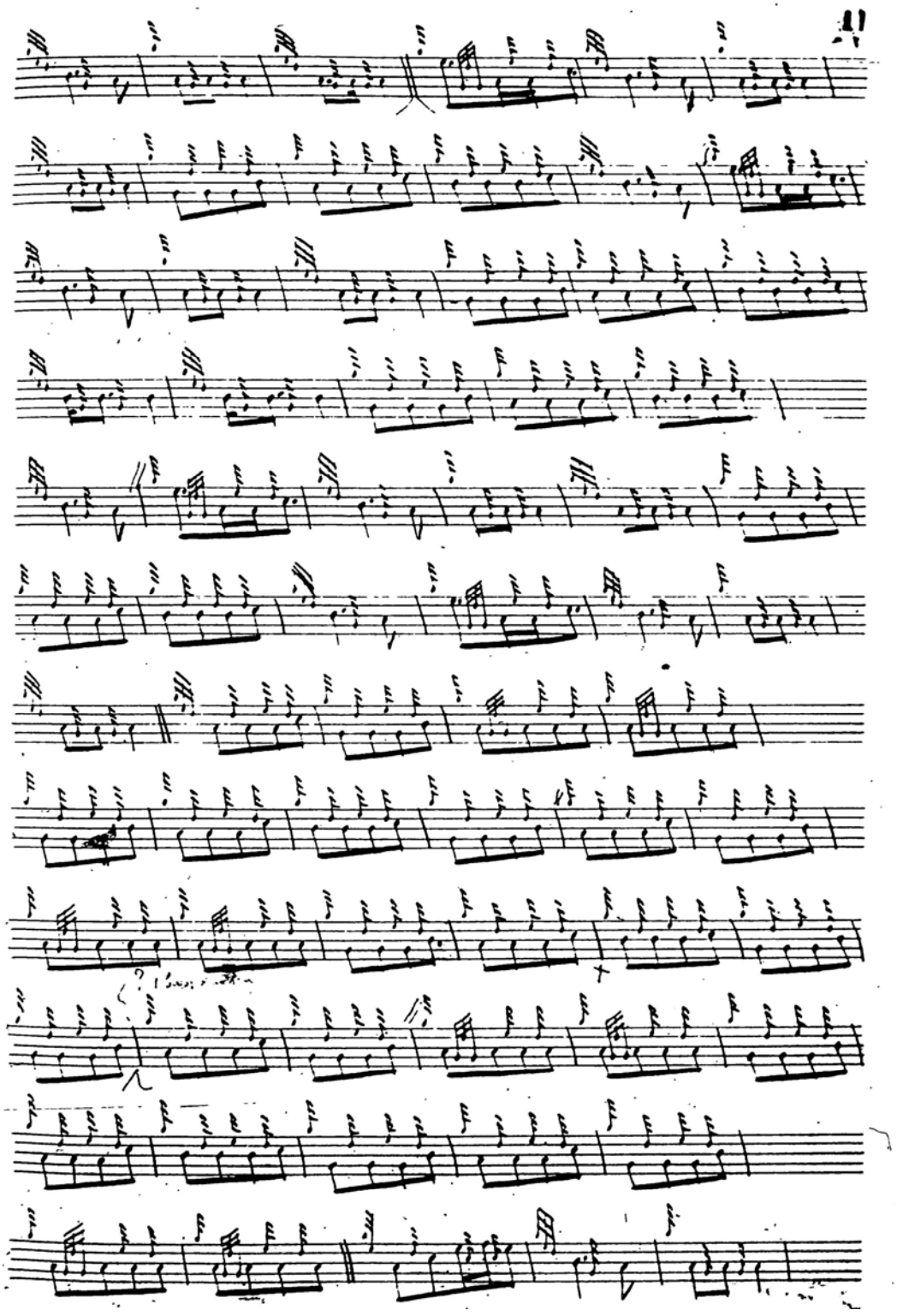
The Old Men of the Shells

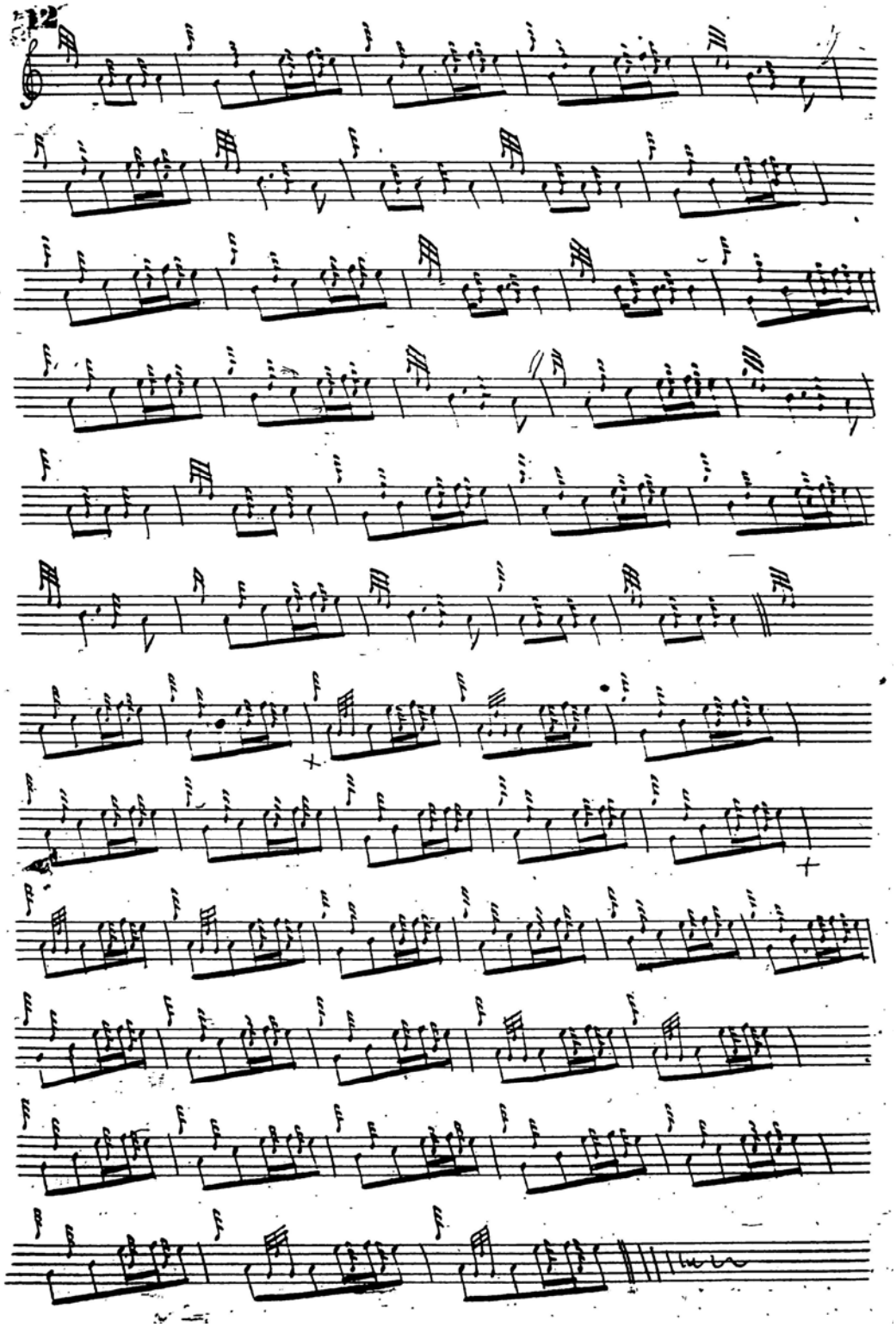
There are settings of this tune in the following manuscript sources:
—**Donald MacDonald**, ff.10-12;
—**Angus MacKay** i, 117-118;
—**D. S. MacDonald**, ii, 62-33;
—**John MacDougall Gillies**, ff.102-3;
—**David Glen**, ff.138-9;

and in the following published source:
—**Ceol Mor**, pp.56-7.

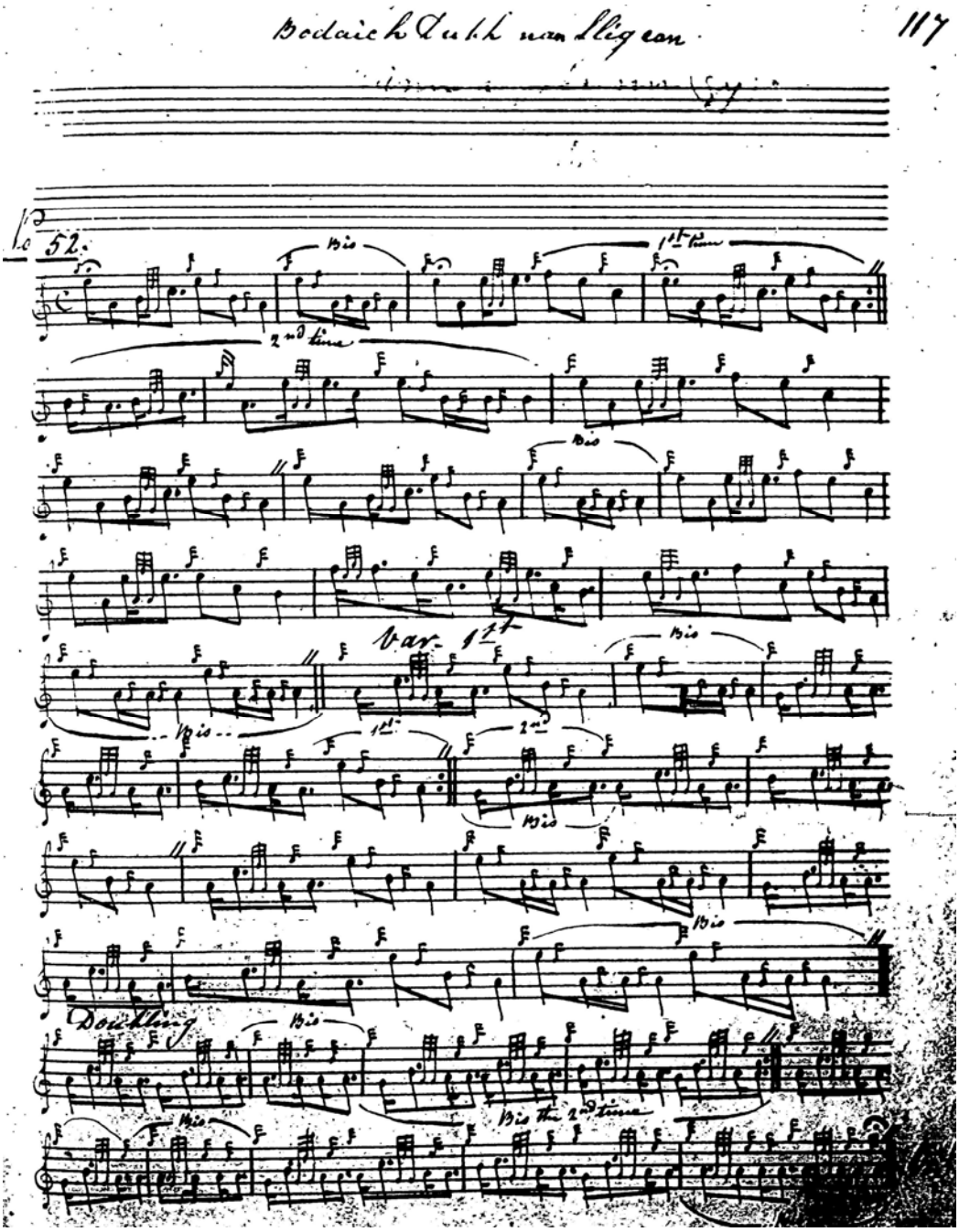
Donald MacDonald's is, at least potentially, the most attractive setting of the tune but his structure at 4 7 8 does not coincide with modern notions of "regularity." C. S. Thomason's "fix" for this gets round the problem, but there are additional difficulties with the Thomason score which are discussed below. MacDonald's timing of the double echo beats on A is interesting and might perhaps be taken as a model for other settings where this feature is present:

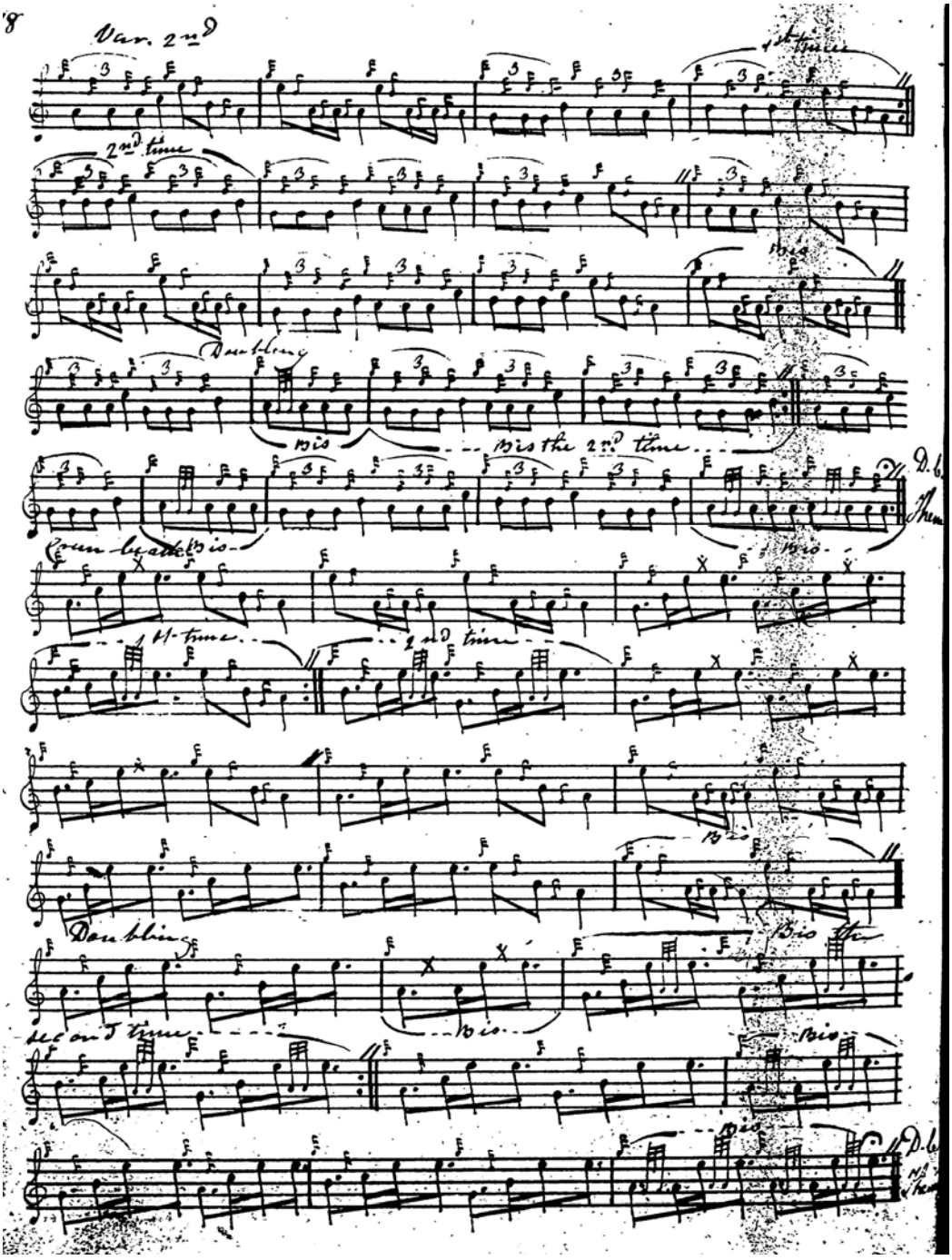

10
BODACH NA SLIGACHIN.





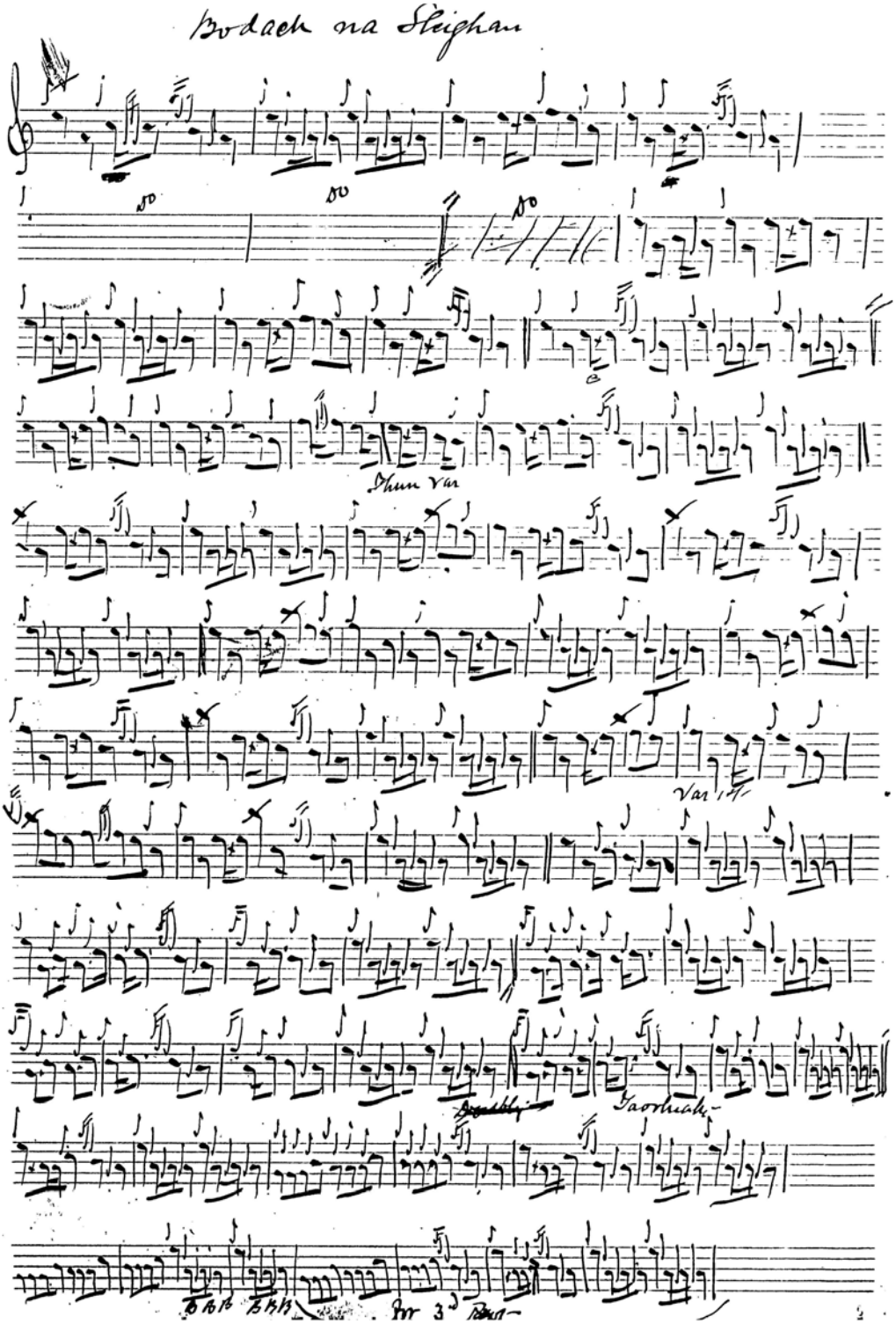
Angus MacKay's score takes a slightly different route through the tune, and this forms the basis of the no.2 setting edited by Archibald Campbell for the *Piobaireachd Society Collection* vol. 7. In his notes Campbell says that it "is a faithful copy (except for abbreviations) from Angus MacKay's MS," but this is not so. There are numerous silent changes to note values in the Piobaireachd Society score and removal of MacKay's instructions to repeat the ground after the taorluath and crunluath doublings. In the *Kilberry Book* Campbell altered the taorluath doubling to make it lead to a curious hybrid breabach/ fosgailte presumably to make it square more exactly with the tone row of the taorluath and crunluath singlings, but a step for which there was no support in the earlier sources. He also inserted additional fermatas in the crunluath singling making the implied timing more square and deliberate. MacKay set the tunes as follows:


Bodaich Dubh nan Sligean
117
52.
Bis
1st time
2nd time
Var. 1st
Bis the 2d time

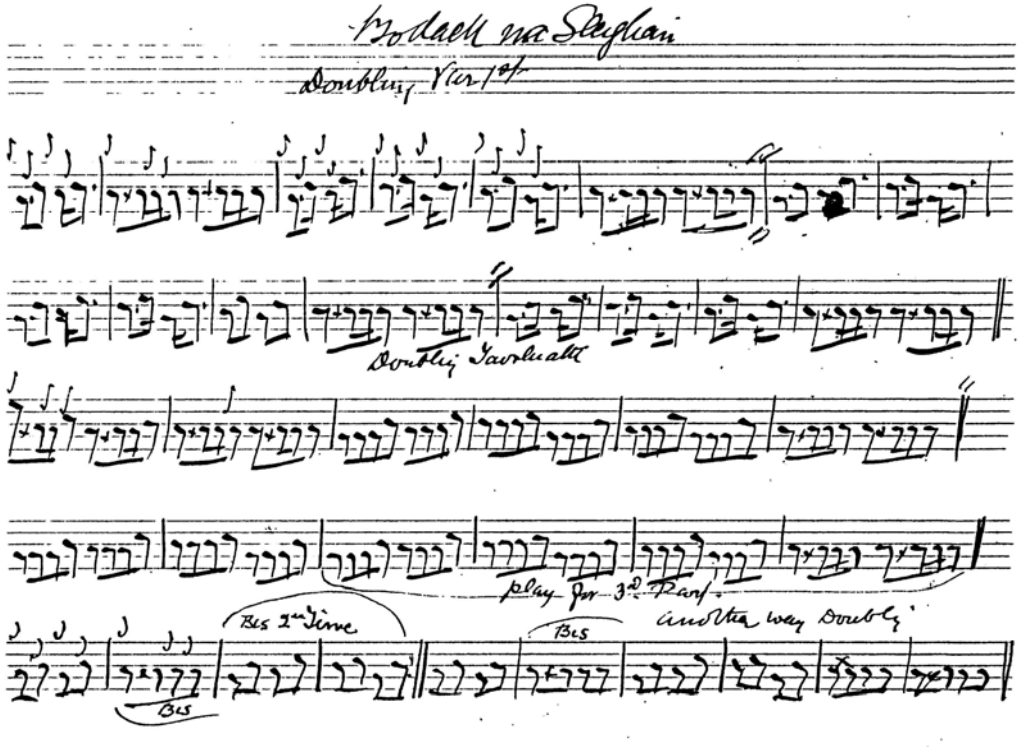


D. S. MacDonald's score adds nothing stylistically to the tune and is not reproduced here.

John MacDougall Gillies's score is interesting, it shows signs of influence from Donald MacDonald, although it has a movement, labelled 'Var 1st,' which MacDonald does not have. Gillies's score goes no further than the taorluath doubling, but since this is in fosgailte form it would be logical to expect it to be succeeded by an ordinary crunluath fosgailte singling and doubling. Gillies sets the tune as follows:

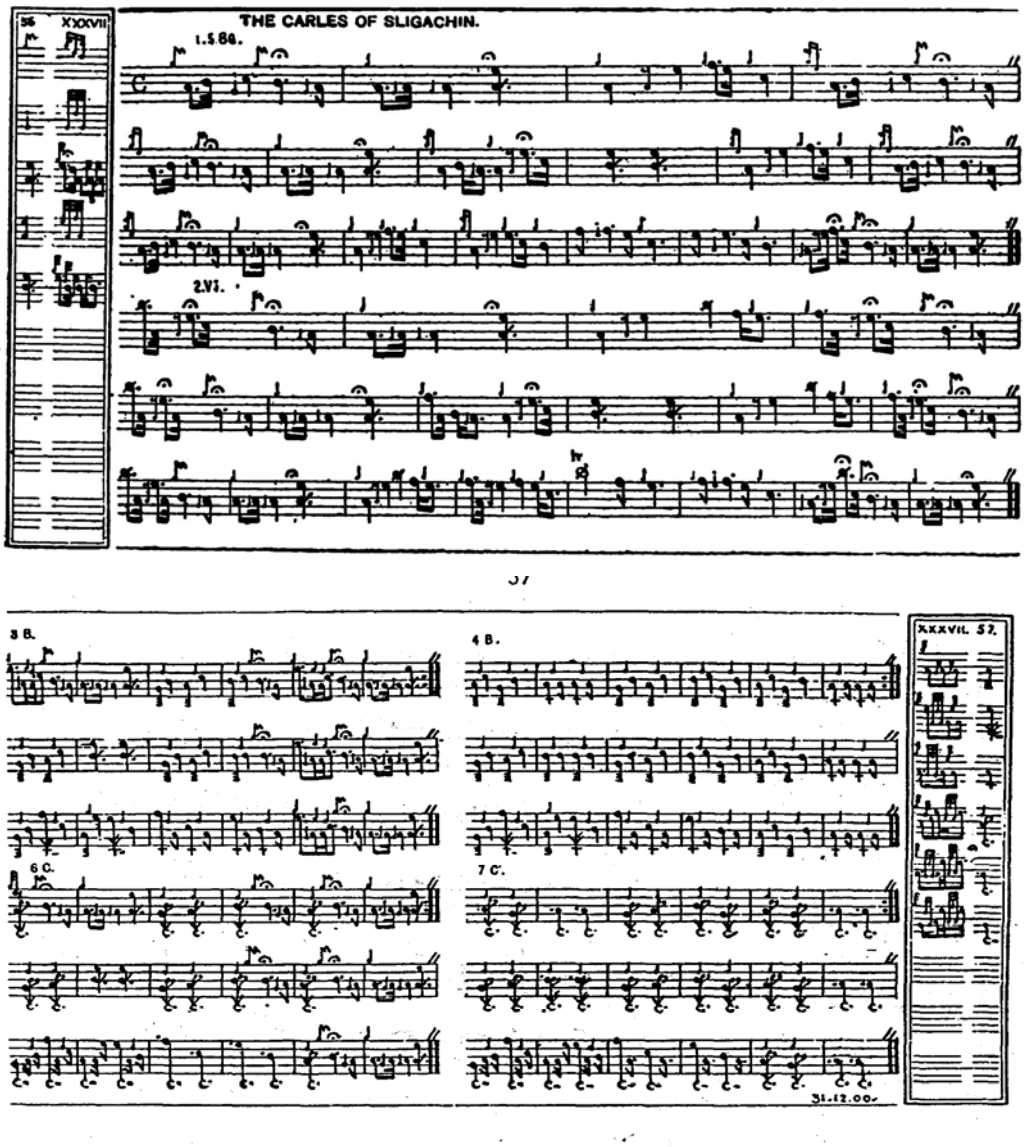

Bodach na Sleighan

Gillies also notes additional timings for variation 1 and the taorluath doubling, as follows:



David Glen's score is likewise derived from Donald MacDonald, and although Glen was a fine editor generally speaking, this particular version does not attempt to resolve the problem with MacDonald's second line, and it is not reproduced here.

C. S. Thomason indicates that his source was also Donald MacDonald's manuscript and marks his score "Ed.," indicating that he had intervened in the tune editorially. He was evidently dissatisfied with his first conclusions, because he had a second go at it later in which he corrected a note error in the thumb variation in version one, and reset the ground so that the first line is made up to 6 bars giving 6: 6 6, although this pattern is not reflected in the variations. His first version seems on the whole the better setting. He resolved the structural problem by dropping the third bar in MacDonald's line two throughout, with generally pleasing effect. There is a note error in the doubling of the taorluath fosgailte, line two bar 8, where the B quaver should be a C as it is in MacDonald. Likewise the General gets in a tangle in the third line of the taorluath and crunluath variations and these should be taken directly from MacDonald. Here is Thomason, version one:



Commentary:

Donald MacDonald gives a rather opaque story concerning this tune in his manuscript notes:

> *Bodaich na Sligachin bith Sinn a nis ga-faigeil*
> This Piobaireachd was composed, after a battle, fought betwixt the Mackenzies of Kintail and the Macdonalds of Sky. The cause of this feud was in revenge of the foster-father of Mackenzie of Kintail's lady, being thrown out of a boat into the sea and drowned, (for boasting of their great valour in drowning so many of the Macdonalds, in or near that part of the sea,) which so enraged an Isle of Sky Macdonald, that he threw him out and told him to join the Macdonalds there. The above battle was fought at the head of Loch Sligachain, in Skye, where the Mackenzies were nearly all murdered. (f.1)

This seems to confuse two different events, firstly the feud between the MacKenzies and MacDonalds of Glengarry which issued in the taking and destruction of Castle Strone during which there was a sea fight in the Kyle of Lochalsh in which many MacDonalds attempting to escape their shattered flagship were deliberately drowned by the vengeful MacKenzies; the Battle of Sligachan took place more than two hundred years before this, however, and was fought between MacDonalds and MacLeods. Alexander MacKenzie in his *History of the Clan MacKenzie* (Inverness, 1879) gives an account of the tangled affairs which led to the first of these incidents (pp.148-151).

On 18th September 1948, the *Oban Times* reported that an up and coming young piper from Partick had won the Argyllshire medal, one Donald MacPherson, and this was the tune he played. It added "MacPherson had a wonderfully good-going set of pipes, excellent fingering and musical rendering." The tune has been a successful competition vehicle for many years: Donald MacLeod won his first Clasp at the Northern Meeting in 1948 playing it, and Duncan Campbell of Foss came third with it in the Highland Societies' competition at Edinburgh in 1838, the title then being given as "The Gathering of the Shells Bodach nan Sligachan."

* * *

Electronic text © Dr. William Donaldson, Aberdeen, Scotland, July 2005