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**TUNES OF MAPLE GLORY: AN EXAMINATION OF ONTARIO MILITIA BAGPIPERS IN THE 20TH CENTURY**

Amongst a crowd of unsuspecting Scottish spectators on a rainy day in August 1987, Canada achieved an historic landmark in the international bagpiping community. After five years of arduous competition, a small group of Canadian pipers and drummers from Toronto were announced as the new Grade 1 World’s Pipe Band Champions at Bellahouston Park, Glasgow and became the first non-Scottish band to be awarded the prestigious championships. Scotland crowned the 78th Fraser Highlanders of Toronto the best competitive band in the world. Ontario bagpiping celebrated its maturation. Surely, in the latter 20th century, amongst a population that could be described as an agglomeration of cultural heterogeneity - thousands of resident immigrants claimed ancestry from the far reaches of Argentina to Zimbabwe - the Scottish faction of Ontario’s cultural mélange asserted itself in the formation and consumption of kilted pipe bands. The music of the bagpipes and the Scottish Highlands has indeed, played a significant role in the cultural fabric of Ontario since the arrival of the United Empire Loyalists in the late eighteenth century. The bagpipes in the twentieth century - particularly after the First World War - have taken Ontario by storm: the proliferation of the art has increased dramatically and thrust its pipers onto the global competitive stage. Today, civilian pipers in Ontario - largely as a result of the efforts of their militia forebears from the early twentieth century - figure prominently in leading solo and ensemble competitions throughout North America.
and Scotland. What were the historical circumstances in the Non-Permanent Active Militia that gave rise to this burgeoning of bagpipe music in the latter twentieth century? Although the pipers of the Ontario Militia units in the early twentieth century are not the sole contributors to this ascension in musicianship; their value is ill considered by their successors. This paper attempts to examine the role these military musicians played in the development of the art which directly contributed to the World Pipe Band Championship victory of the 78th Fraser Highlanders in 1987.

* "Canada's militia was an ineffective and poorly trained force...in fact, the militia was incapable of meeting any development which might require Canada either to defend her own shores, send a force to assist Great Britain, or fulfill Canadian obligations under the Covenant of the League of Nations." F. G. Stanley's declaration of Canadian militia affairs between the First and Second World Wars echoes a familiar theme in defence policy throughout the twentieth century, yet, in the 1920s and 1930s, Canada suffered the effects of a cataclysmic European conflagration which ingrained disturbing images in the national conscience. Understandably, defence spending was not a priority government initiative following the Great War. In fact, defence reduction was the policy which the Department of Militia and Defence was obliged to adhere. When a proposal for a small increase in defence appropriations was initiated by the Tory government in 1921, opposition leader Mackenzie King decried to the House of Commons "the Minister [of Defence] seems to think that at the present time we ought to vote an amount at least equal to amounts that were being voted prior to the War...Conditions are wholly different to-day [sic]; there is not world menace. Where does the Minister expect invasion from?" Canada's fighting capability therefore was reduced upon the demobilization of the Canadian Corps in 1919. Canadian government officials, echoing public sentiment throughout the Dominion, reduced total military expenditures to paltry sums throughout the period between
the two World Wars. The public loathed revisiting the events that occurred between 1914 and 1918; if that meant a proactive mandate of defence reductions in the midst of a world crisis, the government would seek to satisfy public sentiment. Canadians were appalled by the loss of human life during the war and, perhaps, atoning for those four bitter years, turned its back on its blooded military. Nevertheless, Canadians - both veterans and civilians - sought to honor their war dead through the erection of war memorials and participation at annual observances of Remembrance Day. In honoring their fallen comrades though, Canadians identified with a unique group of soldiers who provided music and ceremony at these commemorations. Many of these soldier-musicians had previously inspired and sustained Canadian troops in France and Flanders and as such, struck an angelic chord within the hearts of the citizenry. For the public, these unique regimental ensembles re-created an indescribable bond that was fostered between warriors in battle. Canadians were moved by the invocation of this music as it spoke directly of the horrors, chaos, comradeship, courage, and bereavement brought on by war. Thus, Canadians identified with military bands because their music brought them as close to their veterans and their experiences as they would ever come.

Not foregoing public sentiment however, and with what remaining manpower availability in the Canadian armed services after demobilization, official government expenditures would perforce focus on combat elements rather than ancillary services - combat service support and regimental bands - which were relegated to the periphery of regimental budgets. Nevertheless, the golden age of the regimental band, particularly, the regimental pipe band, blossomed between the two World Wars. In fact, the hub of piping in Canada, and especially Ontario, was found overwhelmingly in the Non-Permanent Active Militia. Doubtless, the survival of these pipe bands, particularly during the 1920s and 1930s, depended almost entirely upon the benevolence (financial and otherwise) of regimental officers and non-commissioned members alike. “Had it not been for the devotion of the
militia officers and men,” Stanley lauded, “it would have been impossible for some of the units to have been kept alive.” iii Certainly, many famous militia regiments from the pre-World War One era could count on continued perpetuation after the 1919 demobilization. Units such as the 15th, 38th and 75th Battalions, Canadian Expeditionary Force could look to the future with renewed hope given the allegiances and commitments of their former warrior classes and contemporary peacetime membership. These units, upon disbandment from active service, were to be the proud sponsors of some of the most acclaimed regimental pipe bands in the Dominion. Indeed, the 48th Highlanders of Canada, the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa and the Toronto Scottish Regiment reported similar musical successes during the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. The militia band then, was the ideal setting for pipers to work towards achieving membership in a high profile, musically professional organization during that era.

The militia bands served a dual purpose for both novice and advanced musicians: First, they provided a haven for aspiring players as senior members of the band offered progressive musical instruction. Second, militia pipe bands - with sufficient uniform allotments and ample practice facilities (such as drill halls and armories) - were attractive to pipers and drummers alike because they provided a forum for rehearsals, negating the logistical challenges faced by civilian bandsmen. Consequently, leading soloists and bandsmen performed together in the ranks of the militia with little or no overhead cost to the individual member. iv

Master players were deliberately sought after by commanding officers to lead the pipes and drums. Often, the hallmark of a good regiment was reflected in the standard of its pipe band. A commanding officer could expect a steady stream of new recruits through his band’s activities in the local community - an ideal recruiting tool - thereby justifying his administrative establishment to militia inspectors. The issue of militia justification was particularly acute during the era of government apathy towards the defence establishment (A militia adversity” in writer Kim Beattie’s words) when
Militia District Inspectors ubiquitously scrutinized units. Therefore, recruiting well-qualified pipe majors to produce good bands fulfilled a military function that served to aid the survival of the regiments. Recruiting also had the unique effect of contributing to the commanding officer’s social status within the community. Citizens from the local community enlisted in the militia to fulfill their military interests and, perhaps more importantly, to ensure that their professional interests were being served through the social avenues offered by the regiment - the Officers’ and Sergeants’ Mess.\textsuperscript{v}

Militia regiments provided an informal kinship network for militiamen that served to further an individual’s professional career, thus perpetuating the euphemistic old boys’ network. Many a commanding officer found himself in a chief executive’s role at a leading industrial or commercial firm. The commanding officer, desirous of young, energetic and intelligent men to take a commission in his regiment, exercised his professional influence to employ potential members of the regiment at his place of work. Militiamen, who were provided with a stable regimen of military training and vibrant social activity, could thus move comfortably from professional to militia life without compromising either role. The role of the pipes and drums in militia recruiting was to provide the overt musical demonstration that quite naturally captivated an audience sympathetic to early twentieth century Anglo-Canadian traditions and values. Additionally, the lavishness of the band’s display of pomp and ceremony often formed the basis of sound regimental custom and tradition, which could only be provided through private donations emanating from the Officers’ Mess (especially during the 1920s and 30s given the lack of funds provided by the Militia Department where the cost of full highland dress uniforms was, and continues to be, costly). It was therefore in the best interest of the commanding officer to retain a healthy regimental pipe band for it overtly demonstrated the commanding officer’s social status within the community. The pipes and drums were also as much a function as they were inspiring: they were a potent tool for harnessing community
support for the regiment through their majesty, colour and stirring music.\textsuperscript{vi}

When potential pipers and drummers enlisted in the militia, it was the pipe major's responsibility to train his musicians to an acceptable standard. However, the pipe major's teaching responsibilities could be alleviated if his musical abilities were noted throughout piping circles, precipitating a steady stream of enlistment from experienced pipers and drummers. Undoubtedly, this was the case with the 48th Highlanders of Canada, based in Toronto, and the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders of Canada (Princess Louise's), in Hamilton.\textsuperscript{vii} These units were the most musically formidable in Ontario during this period for they not only attracted and were composed of accomplished pipers and drummers, but they fostered young musicians to their ranks to ensure band continuity and longevity. Pipe Major Stephen MacKinnon writing in \textit{The Canadian Geographical Journal}, 1932, illustrates the extent to which militia pipe band strength capitalized on the resources of the piping community in the 1920s and 1930s. MacKinnon reported 23 pipe bands in Ontario, of which the 48th reported a roster of 45 pipers and drummers and the Argylls 36 pipers and drummers.\textsuperscript{viii} The remaining militia regiments reported a significantly higher number of musicians than their civilian counterparts at approximately 27 members, while civilian bands (sponsored by legions, city councils, rail companies and the like) reported their numbers in the mid-teens.\textsuperscript{ix}

Why do the 48th and the Argylls figure prominently in Ontario piping history, particularly during the combined eras of Charles Dunbar (pipe major of the Argylls from 1913-1937) and James Fraser (pipe major of the 48th from 1913-1952)? Why were the 48th and the Argylls able to maintain their musical status throughout the late 1960s, 70s and 80s when militia piping across Canada slowly subsided? Simply stated, Pipe Majors Dunbar and Fraser represented a British Army tradition that found a captive audience in the Canadian militia, primarily because the militia was attempting to nurture traditions that duplicated an imperial precedent.
“They [Dunbar and Fraser] contributed a great deal in maintaining the traditions and the standards that had been set in the British Army, especially in the Scottish regiments” notes Major Archie Cairns. Cairns, the ever trenchant observer, continues “It [militia tradition] had all come down through the highland and lowland regiments [of the British Army]. It was all passed down from generation to generation. So it was an in-house thing, but, it helped in fostering and keeping alive things that were not being kept alive in civilian bands.”

The Canadian Militia in 1913 (when Fraser and Dunbar were appointed as pipe majors of their respective regiments) was a young institution. Although a few militia units participated in several isolated conflicts by the commencement of the First World War - primarily the Fenian Raids of 1866, the North-West Rebellion of 1885 and the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902 - they continued to search for traditions outwith their brief excursions on the battlefield in order to assert their own distinctive regimental identities. Because the Canadian army was based upon the British regimental system, the tenets introduced and practiced by men such as Dunbar and Fraser were readily embraced by their adopted colonial regiments. This explanation however, scantily addresses the various factors underlying the success stories of the pipes and drums of the 48th, the Argylls and indeed, the remaining militia regiments who, in no small way, contributed to Ontario’s World Championships victory in 1987. Bands such as the 48th and the Argylls enjoyed unfettered successes throughout the 20th century due to the likes of Dunbar and Fraser. And although one pipe major possessed superior performance skills over the other (Dunbar was a solo piping champion while Fraser was a prolific teacher), their conventions were accepted as gospel by their bandsmen; they came to know no limits of musicianship while simultaneously establishing a high standard of musicianship for their successors. Effectively preaching doctrinaire British army pipe band drills, Fraser and Dunbar were as much sounding boards as incredible fountains of wisdom for their new bands. *Ergo,* if British army
pipe bands were operating in the fashion as Dunbar and Fraser asserted, the 48th and Argylls must mimic their imperial counterparts in order to garner comparable results.

It was a natural progression for colonial militia units in the 1920s to mimic their kith and kin. After all, the Canadians had served along side thousands of Scottish troops on the Western Front in the First World War; the Canadians were exposed first hand to the imperial standard. Moreover, given the sheer number of Scottish units within the Canadian Corps it is not surprising the Scottish-Canadian militia regiments desired the imperial standard for themselves. Not surprisingly, the Corps boasted a massed pipe band estimated in the lower hundreds when they assembled, on one occasion at Camblain le Abbe, to march past Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig in 1917. And although the Canadian Corps was disbanded by 1919, their dramatic achievements in the Great War echoed resoundingly throughout the 1920s to such a degree that their successors jealously preserved their storied past through the outward manifestation of the pipes and drums.

Regimental Pipe Majors such as Dunbar and Fraser homogenized a successful combination of music and leadership, which produced an exceptionally superior musical product. In Fraser and Dunbar’s case, it happened that their vocations as professional British soldiers brought them to the Non-Permanent Active Militia of Canada, which was only too willing to perpetuate their piping pedagogy. The likes of Dunbar and Fraser’s presence in southern Ontario laid the foundations of world-renowned piping at the doorstep of Ontario militia regiments. Pipe bands outwith the 48th and Argylls (militia and civilian) attempted to mirror their success, both on and off the field of competition. These men, their commanding officers and their regiments are in no small way, responsible for the standard of musicianship, which Ontario enjoys today. Doubtless, the evolution of Ontario piping in the twentieth century is based upon their combined imprint in the Non-Permanent Active Militia - a singularly bold assertion, yet not without foundation. Certainly, when the 78th
Fraser Highlanders secured their victory at Bellahouston Park in Glasgow in 1987, a significant number of their pipers were either taught by military pipers or had themselves served in militia units such as the 48th Highlanders. Curiously, the 78th Fraser Highlanders Pipe Major, William Livingstone, who was taught by his father William Livingstone Senior (a Pipe Major in the Royal Canadian Air Force during the Second World War), had served a brief apprenticeship with the 48th Highlanders at the University Avenue Armouries in Toronto in 1956 at the tender age of 14. Additionally, other members of the 1987 World Champions could also trace their musical provenance to this unit as well as to the Toronto Scottish Regiment, the Irish Regiment of Canada and the Canadian Scottish Regiment. The case for militia piping and its yeoman contributions to the competitive art throughout the 20th century must be considered by the contemporary community in order to ensure the art’s future sustainability. Unfortunately, as much as militia pipers are no longer seen competing at highland gatherings across the country as they once were, their fate has been decided by public opinion; perhaps more lamentable is the unfamiliarity of their civilian counterparts who have failed to draw the co-relation between their standards of musicianship and the establishment and enforcement of that standard by their military predecessors. From the standpoint of the civilian competitive piping community, the militia is viewed as a non-entity in its contributions to the art. If that is truly the case - where teaching and functional music making has disappeared from the drill halls and armories - how can Canadian pipers expect to lead the competitive genre of piping and drumming into the 21st century let alone ensure its survivability? Who, therefore, accepts the mantle of responsibility to bequeath our world-class standard to young pipers and drummers who previously, looked to the Canadian military for guidance? Do civilian pipe bands currently bear this responsibility? Are civilian musicians aware of this responsibility? Do top-flight civilian ensembles look to advance their knowledge to the younger generation, or do they look for a short-term quick
competitive fix? Should Canadians be smug enough to expect another World Pipe Band Championships? Although the bagpiping community has always sought alternative sources for patronage, the passing of the militia era is a lamentable travesty of history. The music, the musicians and the standards of musicianship previously enjoyed by the Canadian military have slowly faded into a not so distant memory. The current conditions for Canadian piping within and without the military do not look promising for future successes.

78th Highlanders Pipes and Drums
Halifax Citadel National Historic Site of Canada

End notes


ii. Ibid. pg. 341

iii. Ibid. pg. 342

iv. These conditions remain with us today; however, the cost-cutting policies of the Department of National Defence have reduced the substantive numbers of piper/drummer positions within the roster of the militia regiments thereby silencing the martial music so intimately tied to the unit. This is particularly acute with Scottish units where, for example, the Pipes and Drums of the Canadian Scottish Regiment, who boasted 25 piper/drummer line serial positions in the early 1990s, were reduced to two substantive positions by 1994. These line serials were reserved for the instructional cadre of the band - the pipe major and the drum major thus, disbanding the official status of the regimental band. These reductions have severely hampered the musical effectiveness of bands such as The Canadian Scottish Regiment. Whereas regimental pipe bands relied heavily on internal and external regimental recruitment - the benefits of being payed to rehearse an instrument was one of many incentives to enlist in the band - attracting potential pipers and drummers from the infantry companies as well as from the civilian world now remains a moot issue. The inordinate amount of time required to train a piper or a drummer on a drill evening wreaks havoc to a
militia soldier’s training regimen who, in a previous era, was transferred to the Pipes and Drums platoon. Prior to the mid-1990s, the trainee could expect to be payed and trained as a piper or a drummer belonging to his rightful administrative establishment. Now, the band platoon has been reduced to near nil strength thus restricting membership of the band to trained civilian volunteers. Unfortunately, this has had a detrimental effect upon the standards of musicianship reflected in the militia bands. What value does the Department of National Defence place upon a haphazard system of patronage for the military pipe band? Has not the Department of National Defence sounded the death knell of its pipes and drums? Does this situation not seriously reduce the scope of a Canadian Forces Pipes and Drums Training Centre particularly if the militia regiments do not have the viability to: A) Enroll pipers and drummers proper in the militia? How can a unit expect to send a piper on course when the unit no longer has an authorized band of pipers and drummers and, if a piper is found on strength with the militia, would not his primary trade, say, as an infantry soldier, preclude him from being promoted? Would the training course at the Pipes and Drums Music Centre not be considered redundant as the trainee will not be promoted upon successful completion of the course? Does this scenario present a situation whereby a Pipes and Drums School is redundant? B) Where does a Regular force units expect to draw potential recruits for its battalion pipes and drums (of which only one now exists, found in the 2nd Battalion Royal Canadian Regiment. Prior to 1970, four battalion pipe bands formed the corps of infantry pipes and drums)? Does this not question the purpose of the Reserve Pipe Band system?

v. This familial theme would play a significant role in militia organization, particularly during the Depression - an era of great economic and social uncertainty - where regimental organization (the chain of command) provided an overt confirmation of stability to numerous militiamen who were embittered by the insufficient availability of civil employment and social services. See Kim Beattie’s *Dileas: History of the 48th Highlanders of Canada 1929-1956*, Published by the 48th Highlanders, Toronto, 1957.

For ease of reference, I will refer to the aforementioned units by their colloquial short forms - the 48th and the Argylls.

Large organizations by 21st century criterion. Today, a typical pipe band today would number in between 10-20 pipers while the percussion section would number from approximately 4-12 drummers.


Stephen MacKinnon was pipe major of the Canadian National Railways band, a noted “A” Class band (Grade 1 by contemporary standards) in the 1930s and 40s. He was a native Scot who emigrated to Canada in 1911. During the First World War, MacKinnon served with the Pipes and Drums of the 42nd Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force (The Royal Highlanders of Canada). MacKinnon established a well earned solo career in Canada which no doubt, was aided by his childhood mentor/instructor, the famed piping *tour-de-force* of the late Victorian and early Edwardian period in Scotland, John MacDougall Gillies.

Archie McNeil Cairns, interview by author, digital audio tape recording, London, Ontario, January 18, 1999. Archie Cairns (b. 1928) has a long and distinguished career in piping. Born and raised in Hamilton, Ontario, he learned to play the pipes under his father, Pipe Major John Knox Cairns, Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders of Canada (Princess Louise’s). In the 1940s, Archie was an active member of the professional solo piping community as well as a corps player in the ranks of the Argyll’s pipe band. Cairns’ crowning achievement as a young soloist was winning the coveted Hendrie Gold Medal, the youngest player ever to do so in the relatively short history of the competition. In 1952, Cairns succeeded Pipe Major John Wilson as pipe major of the Argylls. After only two years as pipe major, Cairns was recruited to the Regular Army to lead the newly formed Pipes and Drums of the Regiment of Canadian Guards at Camp Petawawa in 1954. After nine years as pipe major of the Guards, Cairns was assigned to the British Army School of Piping, Edinburgh Scotland, where he graduated with his Pipe Major’s Certificate (qualifying with a “Distinguished Pass”) under Pipe Major (later Captain) John MacLellan. Upon Cairns’ return to Canada in 1964, he transferred to the Royal Canadian Air Force and became Pipe Major of RCAF Air Station Rockcliffe Pipes.
and Drums in Ottawa, Ontario. Upon Cairns retirement from the regular force in 1981, he established the Pipes and Drums Wing of the Canadian Forces School of Music training reserve and regular force pipers and drummers from across Canada. Outwith his military commitments, Cairns was an instrumental figure in furthering the cause of piping within the civilian community conducting clinics across Canada. Cairns also initiated the only sanctioned Gold Medal piping contest outside Scotland, The Piobaireachd Society (Canada) Gold Medal, which has run continuously since 1973. At the time of writing, Cairns remains in constant demand to adjudicate at the most prestigious piping competitions across North America.


xii. The Canadian Scottish Regiment’s Regimental Headquarters are located in Victoria, British Columbia. Western Canadian militia pipe bands enjoyed similar successes during this period as their Ontario counterparts.