The Fergus Scottish Festival and Highland Games:
Keeping Scottishness Alive in Town

The Fergus Scottish Festival and Highland Games is an expression of the Scottish roots of the town of Fergus which was settled by Scots commencing in 1833. The Festival is not necessarily a mirror of the activities of those early settlers. However, it embraces their history. One of the central purposes of the Scottish Festival is to preserve the Scottish heritage of the community. This is manifested by the promotion of the town’s roots as the raison d’être for the Festival. The 1999 festival program, in the welcome from the President reads: “the 54th Fergus Scottish Festival and Highland Games is truly a celebration of Scottish culture - our own rich heritage right here on the Grand River.”

The Scottish heritage of the Fergus area was the platform for the expression of a wider Scottish heritage as expressed by the Fergus Highland Games that began in 1946. This heritage connected with Scotland, the home of Fergus’ early settlers. The highland games, as a popular attraction, was only beginning in 1843 when Queen Victoria began to attend the Braemar games in Scotland. The predominantly Lowlanders of the 1830s Fergus settlement were not concerned with such events. However, the highland games became the vehicle for the founder of the Fergus Highland Games that allowed him to boost the town and the Scottishness of Fergus.

The Scots who built Fergus left the marks of their culture on the town and in their descendants, for long enough to allow Alex Robertson to catch the dying embers of the local pride in their Scottish roots, and fan them into a flame that has lasted until today.
The Scottish Roots of Fergus

Outside the Fergus Library there is a plaque erected by the Ontario Archeological and Historical Sites Board. It details how Scots Adam Fergusson and his partner James Webster founded the predominantly Scottish community of Fergus in 1833.

Fergusson was a lowland Scot of means and he was intent on developing a community that was lowland Scottish in nature. He and Webster went as far as screening settlers for Scottish heritage. Pat Mestern, editor of Looking Back; The Story of Fergus Through the Years 1833-1983 and author of Fergus: A Scottish Town By Birthright said; “The Scots that came here in the 1830s curled and celebrated Hogmanay and St. Andrew’s Day but they didn’t wear kilts and play the bagpipes. In fact, some of them looked down on Highlanders.”

Fergusson and Webster sent back letters and encouraged their friends and relatives to come. According to Mestern, they wanted people who had money who could invest in the community. People like Charles Allen and Lieut. Col. A.D. Ferrier were friends and business associates of Fergusson in Scotland. Allen was a builder and, upon his settlement in 1834, he commenced to construct many of the early log houses in Fergus. Ferrier, educated at the Edinburgh Academy and University, settled in Fergus in 1834 and later became a district councillor and county clerk. Mestern continued; “It was a very closed society here. They were Lowland Scots who were well to do.”

It wasn’t until the 1850s and 1860s that a number of Highlanders came. The journal of A.D. Fordyce relates the circumstances of the arriving Highlanders in 1851; “August 20 - A party of Highland immigrants arrived from Stornoway and it is said cannot get into the Taverns for want of money” and “Sept 10 - More Highland Emigrants arriving”. The Highlanders had been arriving since 1847 in this similar state and the community of Fergus rallied to help; “November 17 - the Highlanders in sad distress. Their case is to be considered at the St. Andrew’s society this evening”. Highlanders were arriving but many continued on to other destinations like Goderich and Kincardine once they regained their strength and the winter ended. However, some did stay in Fergus. Families like: “MacIntosh,
Mackenzie, Cameron, Campbell and Stewart set down roots in the Fergus area.

Fergus gradually became more open about immigration. When Webster moved to Guelph in the late 1850s he sold some of his land to the Irish and Highlanders. The town was well promoted by Fergusson through his book Practical Notes Made During a Tour of Canada and his 1833 report on Fergus. For generations Fergus attracted Scottish settlers.

The town has many bits of evidence to confirm its Scottish roots. Many of the stone buildings in the town date from the later nineteenth century and are the result of the work of Scottish stone masons. Reverend Murray Laurenson, minister at St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church confirmed the Scottish origins of church property; “The church brought out two dikers in 1850 to build the fence around the Church yard.” Fergus resident Jim Gow has a lineage in Fergus that dates to 1863. His great grandfather emigrated from Scotland in 1840 and settled in Guelph in 1850. His grandfather and great uncle moved to Fergus in 1863. His father owned a lime quarry and plant while his great uncle returned to Scotland to become a qualified builder. Upon his return to Fergus, he commenced to build. Mr. Gow related; “My grandfather’s brothers were stone masons by instinct, but Alexander was properly trained as a builder. One of the buildings he built was the old Commercial Hotel which stands today. It was built in 1882 with red sandstone from the forks of the Credit. When I was in Scotland recently I noticed the style is identical to many of the similar type buildings there.”

The Fergus Curling Club was established in 1934 according to a plaque erected by the Ontario Heritage Foundation of the Ministry of Citizenship and Culture. Inside the building there is a display of artifacts from the early days of the club. Included are rocks from 1834 and 1836 along with a championship medal for the club for the year 1834. Not far from the curling Club is St. Andrew’s Church, first built in 1835. At the back is a graveyard surrounded by the wall erected in 1850. Within is the final resting place of many of the early Scottish immigrants. The Church holds the book The Auld Kirk Yard Fergus: In It And About It
by A.D. Fordyce, 1882. The text contains the records of, “118 Tomb-Stones or Monuments”. Among those buried in the Church yard is; David Blair Ferguson, son of Fergus’ founder Adam Ferguson. There are many references to Scottish origins of names like Brown, Burns, Clephane, Brockie, Mackay, Robertson, Stewart, Stuart, Webster, Duncan and Munro, from places like Perthshire, Ayrshire, Fifeshire, Kincardineshire, Banffshire, Argyllshire, Nairnshire, Forfar, Dundee, Kinross-shire, Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire.

The Scottish origins of Fergus seem clear.

The Fergus Highland Games

A little more that one hundred years after the first settlement in Fergus, the first Fergus Highland Games was held on August 17, 1946. The originator of the event was Alex Robertson, a native of Aberdeenshire Scotland who emigrated to Canada in 1921. He approached the newly formed Fergus Chamber of Commerce in 1946 to convince them that a highland games would be appropriate and good for Fergus. They agreed. Pat Mestern served as Fergus Scottish Festival and Highland Games coordinator from 1984 through 1994 and was good friends with Alex Robertson before his death in 1989. She recently recalled

Alex worked in London before he moved here and he used to come to Fergus for meetings. He realized that the architecture was here but the dialect and Scottish culture were disappearing. Fergus looked just like a street in Aberdeen and the curling club was still going but the people didn’t celebrate Hogmanay or St. Andrew’s day anymore. When he moved here he realized that if he didn’t do something to revive it the culture would disappear.

Robert Kerr, General Manager of the Festival from 1985-91, was nineteen when the first games were held. He recalled; “my great grandfather came here in 1850 and all my friends at school had Scottish roots like mine. We took our Scottish heritage for granted. When I was a kid we still celebrated Hogmanay but
gradually it started to die out. Like the bringing of a piece of coal when you visited."37

The purpose of the original games was to preserve the Scottish heritage of the Fergus community and to promote the community of Fergus.38 In the greeting from the Chamber of Commerce in the 1947 games program, President Hugh Templin wrote that the chamber sponsorship was “in recognition of the fact that Fergus owes its beginning to the men and women who came from Scotland over 110 years ago.”39

Robertson and the chamber felt that Fergus was the ideal place to hold a highland games because Fergus was still perceived as being Scottish. At that time there was only one other Highland Games in Ontario, at Embro near London.40 Western recalled; “Alex was familiar with how successful the Embro games were and he knew there was a market for it. They were targeting not only the Scottish people of Fergus but those in Ontario as well.”41 The 1947 program details how the games would start after the “special train from Toronto”42 arrived at 10:15 a.m.

Robertson’s idea was a good one for Fergus. As the reputation of the Games grew, so did the recognition of Fergus as a town. Fergus the town with Scottish roots! The Games changed over the years in small ways. The first few years featured a track meet43, and a midway was added for a few years during the 1970s44 but the core has always been the traditional Scottish competitions of highland dancing, heavy games and pipe band competitions.

The origins of these events go back to the middle ages when clans used to relax after a group hunt (trainchel) with competitions in running, wrestling, piping, dancing and weight putting with boulders.45 Malcolm III ‘Canmore’ King of Scots46 held a competition at Braemar during his reign (1057-93) to test his men for combat roles.47 However, it was not until 1817 that formal competitions were held there.48 Queen Victoria bought the Balmoral estate near Braemar and immersed herself in everything Highland.49 Thereafter, it became fashionable to be appreciative of Highland culture. Highland games became popularized when the Queen attended the Braemar games annually beginning in 1843.50 The lowland Scots who settled in
Fergus in the 1830s, would not have celebrated this type of game but back home it was becoming very popular. By the time Robertson had his idea, Highlanders were a recognizable symbol of Scotland. Whether one was a Lowlander or a Highlander the ‘highland games’ was a symbol with which most Scots would identify.

The Fergus Scottish Festival and Highland Games

The current Fergus Scottish Festival and Highland Games has undergone many transformations and changes in structure over the last 12 years. In 1988, the Highland Games Committee was still an arm of the Fergus Chamber of Commerce and sponsored by that group. The Festival was popular but the cost of operating the Saturday games was becoming a burden. The cost of prize money for the competitions along with other costs had been rising. A new source of revenue was needed. The response was a Friday night tattoo. The success of this innovation was immediate as the people of Fergus responded. Over the preceding years some citizens of the town had become jaded by the repetition of the annual competition oriented games and the congestion from the thousands of tourists. The Fergus motto had become “go to the Games or get out of town” and many vacated Fergus for the duration of the Games. With the advent of the tattoo, a purely entertainment event, literally thousands of Fergusites who had tired of the games returned. Three years later in 1991, the Highland Games added a third day on Sunday and a year later changed the name to the Fergus Scottish Festival and Highland Games. The third day has been evolving and has included concerts, sheep dog and other demonstrations of Scottish culture, and competitions. The Festival boasts many features now. The Avenue of the Clans has been a long standing feature and includes forty to fifty attending clans. Selected clans often have their annual general meetings at the festival and celebrate large reunions including clan chieftains from Scotland. Recent additions are the heritage and genealogy displays, rugby tournaments, a tool and antique show, and the Kirkin’ of The Tartan at St. Andrew’s church at the Sunday service and a strupak to follow. The Fergus Scottish
Festival and Highland Games was incorporated as a not-for-profit group in 1993 and is now separated from the Chamber of Commerce. The Festival now has a Board of Directors, a President and a General Manager who coordinates a plethora of subcommittees of the board.

All the changes have followed one upon the other rather quickly and some have caused some public controversy. With the wave of the popularity of Celtic music the Festival has begun to feature Celtic performers on Sunday. Present General Manager, Rachel Thompson, hopes to attract the Celtic music audience and introduce them to the Scottish culture of the Festival. Other Scottish purists fear this is the thin edge of the wedge that will turn the Festival away from its Scottish roots. In 1996, the Festival was forced to move from the closed in, homey Victoria Park to the more spacious, but to some less attractive Community Centre location away from the downtown area with its Scottish feel. Liability issues due to extreme congestion and overcrowding, in what had become the too small Victoria Park, was one reason for the move. As well, there was the threat of a boycott of the Scottish Highland Dancing Society because of poor conditions and facilities at Victoria Park. This caused General Manager Bruce Youngblood to recommend a move. Founder Alex Robertson, in a 1964 interview said; "The exceptionally beautiful background, with tall trees bordering the south end of the park is similar to the park at Braemar in Scotland." It was with much regret that the Board of Directors approved the move. After fifty-five years in Fergus the Scottish Festival and Highland Games has become a tradition and many citizens care about the goal of preserving Scottish heritage. These recent controversies and the public understanding of the nuances affecting 'their' tradition is a sign that the Scottish heritage is alive and well in Fergus.

The Town of Fergus has been invigorated by the Highland Games and now the Scottish Festival and Highland Games. Its Scottish heritage has been put up front for the public in Fergus and around the world to see. Each year and, as I will explain, all year long there are reminders of the heritage that dates to 1833. Perhaps the most affected are the hundreds of
volunteer Committee members who have been involved over the years. Bill Thoms, former General Manager (1969-70) said: “Even though this is a Scottish festival there are a number of people involved that have no Scottish roots at all but they demonstrate pride in their community by helping to preserve our Scottish heritage through the Festival.”

This may be true but there are many members of the present and past organizing committees that have extensive Scottish ancestry in this region of Ontario and they have been attracted to the festival because of their ethnicity. Bill Beattie, former General Manager and board President, said; “There are a number of people in this community that have Scottish roots and are proud of that fact.” Beattie’s Scottish ancestors settled between Guelph and Fergus in the 1850s. Former General Manager Bruce Youngblood’s Scottish ancestors came to Bellwood in 1904. Avenue of the Clans organizer John K. Campbell is first-generation from Edinburgh in 1955. Treasurer Bill Thoms emigrated from the Glasgow region in the same year as Campbell. Long-time Festival Coordinator Pat Mestern has Scottish roots on her mother’s side back to a migration to Eramosa Township in 1816. Former GM Robert Kerr is descended from a great-grandfather who first migrated to Harriston then Elora and finally settled in Fergus in 1850. Reverend Murray Laurenson’s parents moved from the Shetlands to the Lindsay area. Member of the Fergus Pipe Band and committee volunteer Don McAlpine flies the Lion Rampant at his Fergus home. His ancestor Peter McAlpine arrived in Kingston in 1840 from the Oban area of the west highlands and settled in Elgin County.

One member, Judy Eckhardt, who supervises the heritage area, can trace her roots back to Scotland through five families which settled in Ontario, many of them in the Fergus area. On her father’s side, she is descended from the Scott, Douglas and Dodge families. On her mother’s side, she is descended from the Richardson, Nairn and MacGregor families.

Alexander Scott emigrated to Minto township south of Harriston in 1856 from Peebles-shire, Scotland. His fourth child was Marion Scott who married George Douglas whose father,
Moses Douglas, emigrated from Scotland in 1825. He first landed in Quebec, then moved to Stratford and finally settled in Minto Township close to the Scott family in 1856. George and Marion Douglas had Henrietta who married George Dodge who was the son of George Dodge senior who was from Wales. However, his wife, Margaret Paulin, was the daughter of James Paulin who emigrated from Berwickshire, Scotland. George and Henrietta Dodge had Douglas Dodge who was Judy's father. Judy married her husband Douglas Eckhardt and they recently moved to Elora from Fergus. Judy’s mother was Margaret Richardson whose lineage went back to Andrew Richardson who emigrated to the area between Hamilton and Galt from Roxburgh, Scotland in 1842. Judy’s maternal grandmother’s maiden name was MacGregor Nairn and that family immigrated to Southern Ontario from Scotland in 1842.

The organizing Committee is not entirely made up of people of Scottish descent but the above is a sample of some of the lineage that ties the Fergus Scottish Festival and Highland Games to the Scottish settlers of the area in more than theme.

Fergus Today

Fergus today, to many people, is like many other towns that are part of the greater Canadian culture. However, if you know what to look for or if you spend some time in the town, you will see the signs from yesterday and today that tell of a Scottish heritage. Many of the rectangular gray stone buildings in the older sections of town were built by the Scottish stone masons during the nineteenth century. Eileen McLaughlin, manager of the Highlander Inn, recently returned from a trip to Scotland. She said; “Fergus physically resembles many of the towns I visited in Scotland. The buildings are the same.” First generation immigrant John K. Campbell concurred; “When I first came here on a business trip I was amazed. Fergus has the look of a Scottish town.”

The town is decked out in flags along the main streets and in front of many businesses and some homes. The Lion Rampant is everywhere, occasionally intermixed with St. Andrew’s cross. A visit to shops often reveals a tartan on the wall or some other
Scottish symbol such as a plaque with St. Andrew’s cross. The town promotes its heritage.

During the Festival it is to be expected that things Scottish will be to the fore but Scottish culture continues throughout the rest of the year as well. Reverend Laurenson revealed the cultural activities that St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church is involved with. He said

Along with the Kirkin’ of the Tartan service at the festival we have had quite a few Scottish-flavour activities this past year. We have a Couples Club that sponsors weekly Scottish Country Dancing. Then we celebrate St. Andrew’s Night on November 30 - a gathering and a Ceilidh. The country dancers give demonstrations throughout the year. I marry people sometimes in Gaelic or in kilts. On July 1 we had a teenage girls choir from Perth who sang for us and the community on Canada Day. Then there is the visits we receive in connection with the twinning with Blairgowrie in Scotland. Last fall we had a whole school from there.

The twinning with Blairgowrie was initiated by Don McAlpine. He retired to Fergus in 1987 and felt at home right away. He recalled; “With my Scottish heritage I felt comfortable when I got here. I found it easy to fit in.” Don became involved with the Fergus Pipe Band and the Fergus Scottish Festival. His son reflected that with all the Scottish tradition in Fergus, it should be twinned with a Scottish town. Don took it upon himself to organize, through the Town of Fergus, the twinning with Blairgowrie. Blairgowrie is a similar size town to Fergus; approximately 9,000 population, which is close to Braemar and next to the county where Adam Fergusson was a laird. Since the official twinning in 1995, both towns have hosted each other’s citizens as part of an ongoing cultural exchange. McAlpine added; “This year we are about to cement a tripling with Blairgowrie and a California town called Pleasanton that also has highland games. Their representative will be a special
guest at the opening ceremonies of the Fergus Scottish Festival this year."93

The Highlander Inn features a Scottish theme and has done so since the hotel was purchased and named by the McLaughlin family 13 years ago. Eileen McLaughlin said; "my parents were born in Glasgow and were looking for a site for a Scottish theme and chose Fergus, because of its Scottish feel and the Fergus Highland Games."94 The Highlander Inn now features one of the town’s Robbie Burns nights and the occasional Scottish entertainer outside the festival period. She said; "We attract people who are of Scottish descent as well as people who have visitors from Scotland."95 On Robbie Burns night, January 25, there are two suppers in Fergus as well as two nights at the Elora Mill.96

The town has embraced its roots in terms of the social norms of fashion; at least for the service club crowd. Bruce Youngblood said; "Kilts are worn everywhere in Fergus on formal occasions like the Rotary club functions or the Chamber of Commerce Dinner."97 Bill Beattie added; "If you don’t wear a kilt people will make fun of you."98

The Highland Games and Scottish Festival have drawn attention to the Scottishness of Fergus which has attracted residents. Bill Beattie claims that in his door to door travels in the oil business, he encountered many residents who moved to Fergus as a result of exposure to the town through the Highland Games. John Campbell and Bill Thoms, both Scots by birth, are enamoured with the Scottishness of Fergus and they feel the Festival is in no small way responsible for the atmosphere. Campbell explained; "when I was sent here from Winnipeg on business I arrived on Highland Games day. When I saw what was going on combined with the look of the town I hoped I would be transferred here. When I got the chance to come I jumped at it. Later, I was transferred away. I fought like heck to come back."99 Thoms added; "The Festival and the heritage of the town feed off one another. The Festival refers to the origins of the town and the heritage of the town is the reason for the Festival."100

Fergus is a Canadian town but it has a Scottish core that its
citizens recognize and celebrate. Much of this present day awareness is due to the Fergus Scottish Festival and Highland Games which has for many years highlighted the town’s Scottishness. Over the last half century there have been hundreds of newspaper articles and program stories telling the story of the original settlers and the early days of Fergus. The festival has been a catalyst for many of the year-round Scottish activities.

The Festival Keeps The Heritage Alive

Since its inception the Fergus Highland Games was intended to, as Alex Robertson put it, “give the town distinction”. In this case, the distinction as a town with Scottish roots that hosted a highland games worthy of note. Fifty four years later the key themes are the same and many phrases have been used to express them over the years. In 1947, it was “to stir the blood of all those of Scottish birth or ancestry”. In 1987, it was to “preserve the Scottish heritage of the community” In 1994, the theme was “dedicated to the preservation of the visual, musical, athletic, and written heritage of Scotland”. Now the phrase that is used among committee members is, “the preservation and promotion of Scottish heritage”.

The Fergus Scottish Festival has built upon the foundation of the Scottishness of Fergus as it was created by the early settlers. The initial Lowlanders who were followed by Highlanders made their mark on the face and culture of Fergus; the typically Scottish style stone buildings, the religious traditions of the Presbyterian churches, and traditions like St. Andrew’s Day and curling. The organizers of the Fergus Highland Games consciously intended to wake up the townsfolk who were three and four generations from Scotland. They wanted to show them their culture as it had become expressed through this kind of event not only in places like Fergus but in Scotland.

The Fergus Scottish Festival and Highland Games pays respect to the early Scottish immigrants to the area, but it goes beyond them and their Canadian descendants and reaches out to first generation arrivals. The Scottishness of the Festival is the key to its success but it is not just a look back, but a connection with Scotland, and an opportunity for fellowship. The nostalgia
for Scotland is real for these people. Pat Mestern recalled some stirring moments; “The arena was jam packed and the entertainer was leading sing alongs. Everyone was singing Scottish songs and linking arms. There were tears rolling down people’s cheeks.”

In 1946, Alex Robertson felt he had to act to save the heritage of the town. He succeeded. The Fergus Highland Games and the Fergus Scottish Festival and Highland Games of more recent times has been a vehicle for that purpose. The Festival’s promotion of the Scottish history of the town has made the residents and especially those of Scottish background aware of Fergus’ roots. The continual yearly promotion of the town’s heritage and links to Scotland has made the fact of the town’s origins inescapable. The flying of the Lion Rampant on the streets, the businesses and people that have moved to Fergus because of its Scottishness, the year-round Scottish heritage events and the enthusiasm for things Scottish of many citizens keeps the link to the original settlers. The first settlers may have been Lowlanders and some of them may have looked down on Highlanders, but, the symbolic Scottishness of the Fergus Highland Games has given the town a chance to rally round a ‘flag’ that has brought distinction to Fergus and a pride in the town’s Scottish ancestry.

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