Review


*Old and New World Highland Bagpiping*, by John G. Gibson, is an extensive assessment of information about Highland pipers and piping from a wide range of communities in Scotland. Gibson differentiates between English and Gaelic speaking Scotland and focusing on the latter presents an argument that much of traditional piping stems from the Gaelic language itself. The book is divided into three parts. The focus of the first two is Gaelic Scotland and the third is of rural Cape Breton, Nova Scotia where Gaidhealtachd (Gaelic speaking communities) are diminishing.

Part one discusses piping in what he describes as the ‘Jacobite Highlands’ from 1745 and part two is entitled the ‘Hereditary’ or Chiefs’ pipers in Hanoverian Scotland. The Highlands were, of course, not necessarily Jacobite, as some clans opposed them. Throughout these sections Gibson effectively traces social changes in pipers and piping throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He does this by examining specific pipers and their family linkages to regiments in the military and attempts to explain some of the controversies that surrounded some of these men. For example, Gibson explains that the same man who piped Prince Charles Edward Stuart’s ship *Du Teillay* into Eriskay in 1745 was also the piper for MacNeil of Barra. Some controversy surrounds the name of this particular piper yet Gibson uses Scottish historical archives together with his Cape Breton interviews to trace him throughout the Jacobite campaign, to Wolfe in Quebec, and then to his eventual settlement in Piper’s Cove in Cape Breton. Both sections are organised in a biographical, geographical and genealogical fashion so that anyone who is interested will be able to look up a specific name, family or geographical area. For example, Gibson provides detailed infor-
mation relating to famous piping families such as in Skye or Lochaber, and categorizes them into their specific families such as the MacCrimmons and MacDonalds in Skye and the Keppoch MacDonells in Lochaber; all of whom made significant contributions to the history of piping.

Part three is organised similarly, although it is unique in that it contains a compilation of valuable oral evidence obtained from extensive interviews over the past thirty years. John Gibson has impressively taken it upon himself to collect a great deal of information from within living memory in Cape Breton through focusing on the small Gaidhealtachd that still remains there. Some of the people that Gibson managed to interview are now deceased and it is through his extensive, if not exhaustive, research that casual readers and historians alike will be able to enjoy the information or use it as a starting point for further research.

Although the research in this book is exceptional and invaluable, Gibson makes a differentiation between the classical and the non-classical forms of piping where he attempts to connect certain types of piping and classify them as ‘Gaelic Piping.’ While the author explains that one kind is ‘conservative, memory based piping’ that grew within a Gaelic perception of musicality, he also claims there is a type more based on transcriptions, yet he does not clearly explain his definition of this ‘Gaelic Piping.’ In order to relate to and engage the attention of modern pipers such as myself, who play both classical piobaireachd (Ceol Mor) and Ceol Beag (light music) the use of the language of today’s pipers, would be more effective in order to explain his inventive concept of eighteenth century pipers and piping.

Gibson recognises that both kinds of piping were able to coexist historically but states that the foundation was the ‘non-literate Gaelic form’, which means that the music was learned orally and not written down, regardless of the fact that Gaelic did in fact have a written language. This in itself is controversial because although many of the learners spoke Gaelic, the earliest methods of learning classical piobaireachd, was not Gaelic at all, but a unique method of chanting called Canntaireachd. A similar standard was used for light music, although as Gibson mentions, reels and strathspeys were more improvised. Gibson argues that
these two types of piping were affected by the number of Gaelic speakers and the increase of bilingualism. However, the bardic method of learning on which Canntaireachd is based would place emphasis on exactness. Thus while what Gibson defines as the ‘non-literate’ Gaelic language may have had a small effect on the music, this separate musical language would prevent it from complete corruption. Indeed some of Gibson’s ideas will undoubtedly be significantly controversial among the piping community both in Scotland and Canada, but perhaps it is time for ‘traditionalist’ pipers to examine their art in a new light in that all kinds of piping music could have been effected by a number of variables, including the change in the Gaelic language and its speakers.

Throughout Old and New World Highland Bagpiping, John Gibson emphasises and decodes the traditional Gaelic social and cultural relationships between many of the clans and families in Scotland and in Cape Breton. Gibson manages to do an exceptional job of this while incorporating his awareness of social differences between classes for each Gaelic Scot and their experiences with piping and pipers. This book should be regarded as an excellent reference book, but it may be overly challenging for the casual reader. However, Gibson provides an endless list of questions and concerns within his own research that would provide a solid foundation for further academic research and stimulate debate in the area of piping history.

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