

War or Peace (Cogadh no Sith)

This ancient piobaireachd was played all over the Highlands for some centuries, and has come down to us in a number of different formats as a result. Reputedly it was played on the eve of a battle, or in battle. The other title “The True Gathering of the Clans” suggests a diverse acceptance of the tune by various Highland clans, and apparently it was played during the Jacobite rebellion of 1745/46.

There are at least two records of playing of the tune in the Napoleonic Wars. At the Battle of Saint Pierre (1813) a piper of the Gordon's played **Cogadh no Sith** and was killed as he played. A second piper took up the tune and was also killed. A third piper completed the tune.

Probably the best known playing of the tune was at the Battle of Waterloo (1815) when Piper Kenneth MacKay of Tongue (79th Camerons) played the tune outside the square of infantry, an act of astonishing bravery in the face of advancing cavalry. The square held firm despite heavy casualties - over 300 officers and men killed or wounded, but Kenneth MacKay by some miracle was unharmed. The Cameron Highlanders were singled out for special mention by the Duke of Wellington.

Later, when representatives of the regiment were invited to Paris to appear before the royalty of Europe, Kenneth MacKay played Cogadh no Sith for the Tsar of Russia and was later presented with a set of silver mounted pipes donated by Britain's Prince Regent.

There are few known words to Cogadh no Sith but some have come down to us:

*Cogadh no sith, cogadh no sith,
War or peace, war or peace,
'S coma leam, 's coma leam,
Alike to me, alike to me,
Cogadh no sith;
War or peace;
Marbhar sa cogadh,
I will be killed in the war
No crochar an sith mi.
Or hanged in the peace.*

The last two lines perhaps capture the fatalism of the Highlander's life. Another translation might be “It's all the same to me, war or peace, I'm killed in the war or hung during peace.”

Sources

The tune will be found in Patrick MacDonald's Collection of Vocal Airs (1784), Joseph MacDonald's Treatise, and then in more complete format in a number of manuscripts on the Piob Soc website. Click on any of these links to see the originals:

[Donald MacDonald V2 Cogath na Sith \(War or Peace\)](#)

[Angus MacKay Book War or Peace](#)

[Neil MacLeod Gesto Canntaireachd 3 Coghiegh nha Shie, - War or Peace - the true Gathering of the Clans](#)

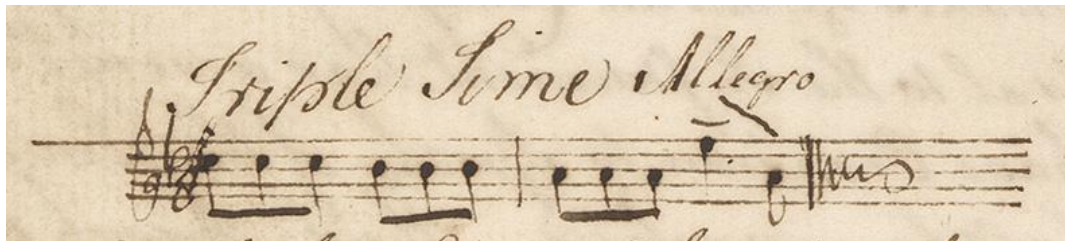
[Peter Reid's Manuscript Peace or War](#)

[David Glen's Book War or Peace](#)

[John MacDougall-Gillies Manuscript Cogath na sith](#)

Joseph MacDonald and Colin Campbell

Joseph MacDonald only provides a couple of bars of the tune, as follows:



Roderick Cannon always thought that the Colin Campbell's Canntaireachd 3rd volume would have contained this tune, as it was known to be played by pipers of his regiment, The Fencibles. However the 3rd volume of the Canntaireachd remains lost, and any help with finding it would be much appreciated - see this link: <http://www.piobaireachd.co.uk/archives/collection/the-search-for-volume-3-of-the-campbell-canntaireachd-by-peter-mccallister/5705>

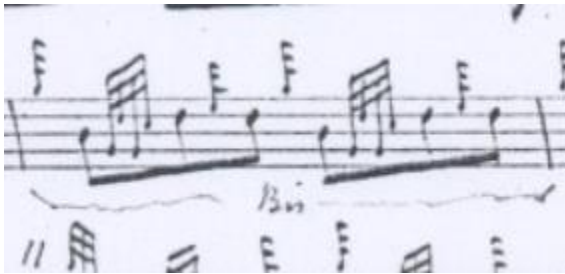
Angus MacKay and Donald MacDonald

Both Angus MacKay and Donald MacDonald seem to get a bit muddled with their doubling of the Ground - and I imagine that pipers learning from either of these resources over the years would have given up at that point, as the music in that variation does not make any sense whatsoever. This is a pity, because the later variations in both Angus Mackay and Donald MacDonald are nice ... and in Donald MacDonald's case they *do* make sense if some note is taken of a simple error in his manuscript version.

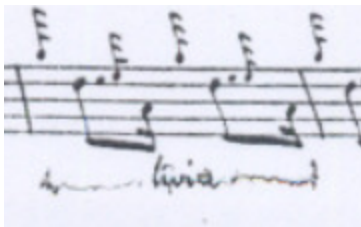
Aside from some problem with the doubling of the Ground, Angus Mackay seems to get into a similar muddle when writing the doublings of the later variations, which he has based on the doubling of the Ground. His score seems

impossible to memorise and I will make no further comment on that version as a result.

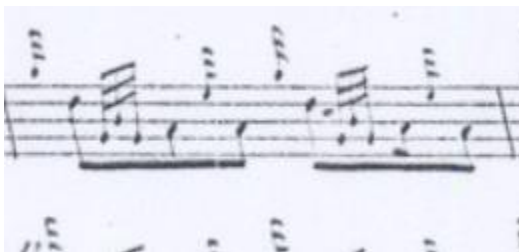
Donald MacDonald's error in later variations was to forget to write "Bis" or "play twice" in his T variation - and he then carried on copying from that mistake for the rest of the tune. The offending bar is the central (and important thematically) bar which has four D movements in a row. In the ground this bar is:



... and as you can see it has the "bis" in there correctly. This carries on correctly in his nice (but rarely played) shiubhal variations, as follows:



... but when he gets to the T variation he forgets to do it...



... leading to a short line of music, and confusion for the piper trying to remember the tune from here on. If the piper simply doubles this bar, the mistake is corrected.

Gesto and Peter Reid

By far the most consistent version is that of Gesto, who took his simple book of canntaireachd from the singing of John (Ian Dubh) MacCrimmon. His version has a musical Ground, doubling of Ground, T singling and doubling, and then 4 C

variations. One of these C variations is a bit on the basic side - in that it simply swaps around a couple of theme notes from C to E, and thus does not add a lot to the development of the tune musically.*

Gesto clearly has the 4 D movements written out in full in the ground and elsewhere: here they are in the ground, mirroring D MacDonald and others exactly:

hodroha, hodroha, hodroha, hodroha,

What Gesto does next is to start the subsequent phrase with a further D note - this is the key to making the tune have musical shape, and D MacDonald does the same. Peter Reid tries to do this, but has also made errors in his repetition of the D notes above - he has 3 instead of 4 throughout, For this reason his version is hard to memorise and could best be discarded unless some editing is performed.

The tune was a Set Tune for the Senior contests at Oban in Inverness in 2011, and on that occasion the Gesto setting was chosen for pipers to play:

[War or Peace Gesto Score](#)

A recording of Bill Livingstone playing the tune is at this link:

<http://www.piobaireachd.co.uk/library/tunes-index?tune=war-or-peace>

Note that this version includes repeats of the Urlar at various points, including before the crunluath-a-mach - so that the tune ends with this exciting variation. The reason why the Piobaireachd Society decided to do that, (for that year of competition where the tune was a Set Tune) is not remembered. Possibly someone felt it seemed more authentic and in line with ancient practice.

The new Piobaireachd Society Book 10 version (2016) is taken from the score provided by Roderick Cannon for his (still to be published) book about Gesto. This version adds double bar lines to show the tune in a 4:6:6 pattern as had been the case in versions in the original editions of Book 10. I contacted the Secretary of the Music Committee (Alan Forbes) about that, and he felt that these bar-lines did not really matter all that much, as the music is subject to interpretation anyway. However, readers of the new Book 10 version will note that the second line is just the first line with two added bars in the middle and the third with two added bars at the end, so the 4:6:6 pattern is not without a certain logic.†

Roderick Cannon elected to add leumluath variations to the Gesto score and omits the crunluath variation mentioned above (*)

David Glen and John MacDougall Gillies

David Glen's version, available on our website, starts in a promising manner with a well set-out ground though the doubling of this lacks musicality. The tune is then rather over-heavy with the number of variations. Each section (dithis, leumluath, taorlauth etc.) has a singling, doubling and tripling. The triplings are based on the doubling of the Ground and to my ear they become a bit tiresome.

John MacDougall Gillies only pens a short document, with the Ground and its doubling, though interestingly these were from the Gesto setting, suggesting that this version has been known and loved by pipers for some generations. His version uses the bar lines mentioned above (†) - possibly this was his way of splitting the tune into lines of music.

Hopefully the new Piobaireachd Society Gesto version will become accepted and played more widely.

The views in this article are my own and any mistakes I have made are of course also my own fault. I am indebted to various individuals for their advice on how to approach this tune over recent years.

Peter McCalister