

I got a Kiss of the Kings Hand

Analysis by Roderick Livingstone

Played by Darach Urquhart

Chair Derek Fraser.

Just a very quick introduction of Roddy Livingstone. Roddy is our Treasurer and he is going to be talking about one of our classic tunes. I don't want to say too much because he is going to tell you all about it.

Darach Urquhart is a member of our General Committee, and he will play the tune.

So over to Roddy.

The Piobaireachd Society Conference 2023

Analysis of a tune – I got a kiss of the King's hand

Good morning.

My subject today is titled an "analysis of a tune". However, I feel this might be over aggrandising my efforts – it might better be described as "a few thoughts, observations and comments on a tune".

When I was asked to deliver this session, along with Darach Urquhart we considered a few different pieces before settling on 'I got a kiss of the King's hand'. It's a well known tune and whilst most pieces of music in the piobaireachd repository ebb and flow in popularity, this one has maintained a pretty consistent level of favour over the past one hundred and fifty years winning many significant prizes and quite often being heard in recital.

It's a tune which at face value looks pretty straightforward or so I thought! When one gets into the weeds of any tune, there are aspects which have not necessarily caught the attention when learning the tune as a competitor or even passing it on as a teacher. Without doubt it is a very melodic piece of music and perhaps what Archibald Campbell of Kilberry might have referred to as a 'tuney tune' although his use of this term was not always meant as a disparaging comment as has been suggested by some commentators.

So – to our tale.

SLIDE 2

The tune is generally given the title “I got a kiss of the King’s hand” although Binneas records it as “I gave a kiss to the Kings Hand”. I’m not going to read anything into these subtle grammatical differences.

So, which King does the title refer to? The story most of us will be familiar with, through the notes in Angus MacKay’s book, relates to the eve of the battle of Worcester in 1651 when King Charles II, being so impressed with the playing of Patrick Mor MacCrimmon piper to Norman MacLeod of MacLeod allowed him the honour of kissing hands and the tune was composed in commemoration of the event. Another account locates the event at the royal encampment near Stirling. Again the year is stated as 1651 but this time the composition is attributed to John MacCrimmon and the famous story of him keeping his head covered in the presence of royalty whilst all around him were bareheaded.

Yet another account indicates that the tune was not composed by a MacCrimmon at all but a by a MacMillan, piper to Lochiel in 1745. If so, the ‘king’ in question would of course be Charles Edward Stuart.

SLIDE 3

The poem here is reproduced from a small book produced by fellow Society member John Shone some 45 years ago – The Kilberry Letters. In the accompanying letter from Archibald Campbell to Dr MacPhail, it is reported that Lady Elspeth Campbell may have been the source through which it was passed to his mother. Identifying the author is a speculative matter but it has been suggested that it could be attributable to Andrew Lang. The words would seem to indicate the subject was Charles Edward Stuart rather than Charles II. So what do we know so far? In common with many other old tunes, the history has become lost, edited or embellished with the passage of time. Time and again we are reminded that the title of a tune may be confusing, inaccurate or misleading so here we have a possible further example. How we play the play and shape the tune should be dictated by the music rather than the handle we give it.

And so to the music.....

SLIDE 4

Here is the setting as published in the Society’s collection – the image here taken from a 1938 edition of Book 7. There is no doubt that this was already a

reasonably well known tune at the turn of the 20th Century – probably because of its inclusion in Angus MacKay's book. It may have been for this reason that the Piobaireachd Society did not publish it earlier in our second series starting in 1925.

This is the setting we almost exclusively hear today and is fairly straightforward.

SLIDE 5

Next we look at the setting as published in the Kilberry Book of Ceol Mor alongside the handwritten MS of Archibald Campbell as reproduced in 'Sidelights to the Kilberry Book of Ceol Mor'.

Unsurprisingly, the setting published in the Kilberry Book in 1948 is very similar to the Society's 1938 publication. The immediately apparent difference is the use of pause marks or fermata in the taorluath and crunluath variations in the Kilberry Book. Much has been said, positive and negative, regarding Archibald Campbell's use of fermata. In the twenty five years I was a pupil of James Campbell it was a subject we often discussed. The constant answer which I received when asking what exactly was meant by the use of the fermata was that it was a "denial of shortness" or an "indication of smoothness". This was also the explanation given to Andrew Wright and Dugald MacNeill by James when they spoke at length to him about his father's work and legacy in preparation for a paper for presented to this conference twenty years ago. It fits well with the much overlooked comments in the introduction to the Kilberry Book of Ceol Mor on the scores making no pretence to be scientifically accurate and the description of pipers' jargon. The key issue here is that the fermata is not to be treated in the way in which a classically trained musician or a musicologist might interpret it.

In a 1954 letter to Archie Kenneth, Kilberry states "One criticism of the K Book I have received was that I should have devised a system for various degrees of pause". I have in my possession Kilberry's annotated copies of the first 10 books of the Society's collection in which, in keeping with the classical scholar he was before entering the law uses Greek characters – alpha, beta, gamma, delta etc – to illustrate these subtleties and of course there is use of standard alphabet characters throughout 'Sidelights'.

So we have four fermatas in a row across the cadences which – to me at least - this makes sense indicating a very slight pause or 'hang' before a smooth run

down. If we look back at the ground, we see the fermata appears over the final notes of some bars - for example bars one and three in the first line. The uninitiated or unwary might consider this an invitation to treat this as the end of a phrase and hold the note for about a fortnight! Indeed, thirty to forty years ago it wasn't uncommon to hear that trap being fallen into. The real intention here is to illustrate the smooth joining of the notes into a flowing 2 bar phrase.

Turning to the 'Sidelights' version – you will immediately note that Archibald Campbell records a 6/8 time signature rather than the common time allocated in the Society's Book 7 and the Kilberry Book which of course doubles the number of bars of music. It should be remembered that the 'Sidelights' settings were all recorded pre-1917 and mostly in 1911 so clearly a change of mind on how best to represent or depict the tune occurred in the next twenty to thirty years. That being said it is clear that as Archibald Campbell's study of piobaireachd progressed to maturity, he felt that the attribution of time signatures was of limited importance. It is recorded that he even considered omitting time signatures altogether from the Kilberry Book but was fearful of doing so for being dismissed as a 'krank'.

SLIDE 6

Some five years after the publication of the Kilberry Book, Dr Roddy Ross was brave enough to take that leap of faith regarding time signatures as we see here in the Binneas score. Many pipers today find Binneas – once you've got used to the three line stave – a very valuable and practical demonstration of the melodic line through relative note values. It may surprise those who think of Binneas as being the gospel of the so-called MacPherson school whilst the Kilberry Book is the doctrine of the Cameron teaching that James Campbell regularly referred me to certain passages in Binneas as being a clearer representation of what his father was trying to communicate than was achieved in the Kilberry Book. This just further supports the position that there weren't and aren't two separate "schools" of piobaireachd playing, rather subtleties of 'sub-styles' which have evolved from a common approach within the orthodox framework handed down through John MacKay.

SLIDE 7

I've already referred to the publication of the tune in Angus MacKay's book and here it is. Note that Angus MacKay chooses to record in 6/8 time. So how

many bars should there be in the first line of variation 1? Well if the pattern of the ground is followed, convention would dictate twelve but a quick count here shows only eleven! If you read the editorial notes in Book 7 you will learn it is generally accepted that this was an error but, when the fact that Angus MacKay may have made an error was suggested, this caused some consternation in the piping world as certain pipers believed Angus MacKay's book was irrefutable. The expansion into 12 bars to 'even things up' or correct the error was the work of General Thomason whose score we shall come to shortly.

But first we'll take a quick look at some other sources.....

SLIDE 8

Here is David Glen's printed version. The significant factors here for me are firstly the faint but discernible use of the slur mark in the opening notes suggesting an 'appoggiatura' approach. This is a whole subject in itself which is discussed in forensic detail in the recently published "Campbell Letters" book edited by Malcolm MacRae.

Also we note that in variation one, Glen makes the editorial decision to 'tie' the couplets represented elsewhere into groups of 4. Perhaps an attempt to represent the pulse or scansion of the tune here?

SLIDE 9

Here we have Peter Reid's MS – note here the additional gracenote to the cadences opening the phrases, and the cadences used throughout variation one which can create a very pleasant effect if handled sympathetically. Also, no time signature is recorded here.

SLIDE 10

Another manuscript – this time from John Smith. It's more like the modern settings in the ground but once again cadences are introduced in variation 1. I've noted at the beginning of the ground the author has overwritten 2/4 with a Common Time symbol – or possibly vice versa. We can only speculate on the thinking here but when we get to variation one, 2/4 seems to be the chosen timing.

SLIDE 11

As promised here is the score as laid down by General Thomason – the man who had the temerity to correct Angus MacKay!

SLIDE 12

This, I'm sure you'll be delighted to hear, is my final slide!

Here is the first bar of the tune reproduced from nine different sources – almost all written slightly differently from one another but the underlying melodic line follows the same basic framework with attempts to represent slight diversity of musical interpretation. For example, subtle differences in the length of the Bs noticeable in A MacKay's and the Binneas version. These are probably touches of light and shade which most discerning pipers would apply anyway and really just demonstrates two final thoughts for me.

Firstly the limitations of staff notation we still face for recording ceol mor – this was experienced by Joseph MacDonald, Donald MacDonald, Angus MacKay, Charles Thomason, Archie Campbell and still challenges us today.

Secondly, the caution that needs to be exercised when considering how we write piobaireachd as opposed to how we actually play it.

And to play the tune we are very fortunate to have Darach Urquhart with us this morning. For those who don't know Darach, he is a native of Kyle of Lochalsh in Wester Ross where he lived next door to Iain MacFadyen and indeed was taught by Iain until moving to Glasgow to attend university when he continued his piobaireachd studies with Robert Wallace. Darach is a successful solo competitor. Having won a number of major prizes including the Silver Medal at Oban a couple of years ago he is now very much 'in the hunt' for the Gold Medals. He recently joined the General Committee of the Piobaireachd Society bringing some welcome younger blood and a fresh approach. He tells me he is happy to perform in front of an audience but even happier when he's in the audience!

His playing of "I got a kiss of the King's Hand" will tell the story far better than my feeble attempts using words thus far this morning.

Ladies and Gentlemen- please welcome Darach Urquhart!

Darach Uruhart plays I got a Kiss of the King's Hand.

DF Please join with me in thanking Roddy and Darach for such an excellent demonstration and performance. I am sure Roddy would be happy to take and questions..

RL Please refer any questions to my Media Manager Mr Robert Wallace and my Lawyer Mr Malcolm McRae. That was really just my thoughts and opinions.

John Frater

Am I correct in thinking that Angus MacKay's famous "missing bar" in the dithis is also missing in MS of Peter Reid?

RL It is, yes, you are absolutely right. Peter Reid has it in the singling, with a cadence. Thanks John for pointing that out.

Barbaby Brown

It is lovely to see that "missing bar" shown on the screen. Thank you for putting it there. You have said that General Thomason was the first person to suggest that Angus MacKay was wrong. I am just underlining that you said that and you meant it. So you are not hiding the fact that every single piece of evidence we have... I think it's a frame of reference.... as I think many of you know I am supportive of these ...if you reframe it....I'd put it this way. If you go back to the early sources, this is everywhere. You'd hardly find a setting where it doesn't happen. So I'd say that is a post 1816 setting. If you are rowing a boat and you are predictable it will get very tedious. If you are rowing from Scotland to Ireland it gets very boring. My cousin was on one of those reconstruction galleys so I heard all about it. They sang every single song they knew in order to stay awake on windless nights rowing to Iceland.

Now you get a waulking song, a rowing song, all the time, if you look through Collinson's three volumes of waulking songs, every single one of them has those piobaireachd missing bars. I'd like to say that the evidence is completely unequivocal that this was a part of that. And it makes it much more exciting and dramatic when in fact what you have, instead of predictability, you've got drama.

Robert Wallace

Roddy, was it the engineer in Thomason that made him feel that he should get it all regularised?

RL That's interesting. I think probably yes and this is what Archibald Campbell suggested. I think he referred to Thomason as the greatest emendator of all time or something along those lines. Thomason was a highly decorated army engineer. He survived the Indian mutiny by the skin of his teeth. He made his own pipes – a man of parts as they say – but yes definitely I think probably that was the influence there.

If you look at the lineage as it comes down, Archibald Campbell, classics scholar and a lawyer and a High Court Judge. James Campbell, his son, an esteemed lawyer. Coming down through that line to myself, a criminal financial investigator. We must work on evidence. Put the evidence in front of us and we will present the evidence. We will make a decision based upon that evidence. I think Thomason, in a slightly different profession, wanted to see things in symmetry and even-ness. The engineer as opposed to the artist.

?? name. This is not a question, just a comment. For those unaware, we are very fortunate in having an very eloquent interpretation of this tune played by the great Robert Reid. There is a CD available from the College of Piping. He gives a very good performance of this tune well worth a listen to.

RL Absolutely. I think that is on the Piobaireachd Society website. I must admit that, when I was pulling this together, there is so much material there. There are various other sources there from which those slides are drawn up.

This tune looks pretty straightforward, but once you scratch the surface there is a lot to it, apart from what is in the well known music.

Jack Taylor

Can I just comment on Kilberry's controversial use of the pause mark. You say they are not in line with musical convention. Well, actually I would say that they are pretty well in line with musical convention. That mark means that the note can be played at a length at the discretion of the performer. Now that can just be a hint longer than its note value, or quite a lot longer than its note value. So where there are four in a row there, and two of them are quavers, they are not meant to be the length of quavers, but they are not meant to be the same length as each other.

RL I don't disagree. I didn't articulate that very well. The non classically trained piper probably thinks of it as that's not what it means at all.

JT Another thing. I noticed that in Angus MacKay's book he writes Andante. People often think of Andante as being slow. The correct translation apparently is smooth. I thought that the way he wrote it, in 6/8 time, conveyed that very nicely. That smoothness there in the melody, which Darach took out so well.

Peter McCalister

I was popping in and out to see Darach warming up so I didn't hear everything. Did anybody mention the first bar – sometimes you hear ...sings with pause on 2nd B ...where did that come from?

Archie MacLean

I think it came from Willie MacDonald Benbecula that way. Its very nice.

PM Does everybody understand what I mean? In the first bar, the second B is extended. It is very nice. It fits with the words.

BB That's why Willie Benbecula played it. It fits with the words.

RL It is also in Binneas.

RW Just one wee point about it. It is a celebratory tune, and it part of the kind of magic of Piobaireachd that we have one wee figure.. sings opening.. and the composer clearly extrapolates from that a full piece of music. It is quite unique in that way. There is this musical figure that demonstrates the celebratory aspect of it, and then he extends that down through the variations.

RL This is the point I was making. The appropriateness of the name in this case. It is a celebratory tune absolutely. Interesting that we heard about the rowing tunes, the galley tunes, and I think John alluded earlier to The Laird of Coll's Galley also being called Battle of the Pass of Crieff. It must have been a hell of a job rowing that galley through the Pass of Crieff. The Battle of the Pass of Crieff was apparently a skirmish between the smugglers, the illegal distillers, the bootleggers, and the excise. But we are guided by the music. We are not guided necessarily by the title. I think here, though, it is a pretty clear title.

I'd like to really thank Darach for his wonderful playing of the tune.

