

Returning to Skye

Language, Heritage and The Silver Chanter

Dr Decker Forrest

Chair Dr Iain Cameron

IC Welcome back. It is now my pleasure to introduce Dr Decker Forrest. Decker is the programme lead for the Gaelic and Traditional Music degree at Sal Mor Ostaig, the Gaelic College on the Isle of Skye.

Originally from San Diego, Decker is an accomplished piper. His past successes have been the Silver Medal at Oban and the Dunvegan Medal. He held academic positions at the Royal Scottish College of Music and Drama in the early 2000s, and in 2009 he was awarded his doctorate from the University of St Andrews doing some work looking at changes in performance and practice of Light Music, from the early 19th to the mid 20th century.

So we are delighted for you to join us, and we look forward to your presentation – returning to Skye, language, heritage and the Silver Chanter.

DF The talk I have prepared for you today, as its title suggests, is broad in scope. My intention is to recentre and perhaps reawaken our awareness of the deep and enduring connection between the Great Highland Bagpipe – a’ phìob mhòr – and Gaelic cultural heritage using the Silver Chanter Competition and the local Skye traditions connected to it as a point of focus.



We all of course recognise that, like the kilt, our instrument has become a symbol of pan-Scottishness.

With its importance and relevance having spread through invention, reinvention and preservation across Scotland and abroad over generations, it goes without saying that many *Highland pipers* with little or no connection with the language and culture of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland have, along with their associated communities of other musicians, instrument makers and audiences, contributed hugely to the growth and evolution of the Great Highland Bagpipe and created new cultural associations and traditions, particularly over the last 170 years or so.

Although less frequent today perhaps, it has long been claimed (no doubt especially by those with Highland or Hebridean skin in the game) that ceòl mòr can never be fully expressed by a piper unless they have Gaelic and I often think of PM Robert Reid, from the coal mining town of Slamaman in Stirlingshire, arguably one of the most accomplished Highland pipers of all time, who thrived during a period when he was surrounded by plenty top-tier Gaelic-speaking pipers – when he reflected:

“They say that you have to be born in the shadow of a towering mountain. Well’n I was born in the shadow of a towering coal bing.”

I’m not here today to discuss whether or not such tropes have any truth in them, however the fact remains that for all of its more recent history, growth and international relevance, the Great Highland Bagpipe is indigenous to the Gàidhealtachd – the most fundamental characteristics of its sound, tonality and musical forms stretching back over hundreds of years and interwoven with a wealth of related stories, historical legends, proverbs, poetic verse, and cultural associations preserved in literature and oral tradition.

A fascinating and unique relationship with song and Gaelic language rhythm has long been central to the composition and musical interpretation of pipe music. Even a rich and comprehensive list of technical terminology for the constituting parts of the instrument itself and many of the ornaments and structural elements of its musical forms exists, having been passed down by Gaelic-speaking pipers and non-pipers alike for centuries.

The Great Highland Bagpipe is Scotland’s National Instrument, but alongside its broader cultural associations is a unique and complex sense of meaning that for many goes right to the heart of Gaelic cultural identity.

One of the more recent important developments for the Pìobaireachd Society occurred year before last when the responsibility of running of the Silver Chanter competition – Am Feadan Airgead – was transferred to the Society from the National Piping Centre.



Dame Flora MacLeod and Hector Macfadyen 1987

The Silver Chanter became an important annual fixture for locals and an international piping scene alike.

Each year, the music, stories and traditions of the MacCrimmons – embedded in the landscape and cultural identity of people from Skye, or *Sgiathanaich*, were brought to life in the very castle in which the famous MacCrimmon pipers – Dòmhnall Mòr, Pàdraig Mòr, Pàdraig Òg, Dòmhnall Bàn and others – had once performed.



Inaugural Silver Chanter competition 1967. L-R Unknown, William MacDonald Benbecula, Duncan MacFadyen, Iain Macfadyen, Dame Flora MacLeod, Hector Macfadyen, D R MacLennan

To give a quick recap of the competition, it was established in 1967 by Dame Flora MacLeod, 28th Chief of MacLeod, alongside Seumas MacNeill and John MacFadyen and, rather uniquely for a piping competition, celebrated the music of one of Gaeldom's most recognised dynastic musical traditions, the MacCrimmons, in its historical homeland.

Sadly, the competition removed to the National Piping Centre in 2018 when, after years of attrition, the Skye Piping Society could no longer cope with the pressure to meet the increasing and grossly unsympathetic financial demands from the Castle.

With the combined forces of the NPC, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig and Torrabhaig Distillery, the competition returned to Skye in 2022 when it was held at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig and after a years' hiatus, the competition was held again last year, in 2024, at the College with the NPCs responsibility having been passed to the Piobaireachd Society.

The recent return of the Silver Chanter to Skye is cause for celebration and gives us an opportunity to reflect on the important place of the MacCrimmons in Gaelic oral tradition which is full of examples of music, stories, songs,



Slochd Nam Piobairean

placenames and local traditions. As one would expect, this cultural heritage is particularly rich in and around Borreraig, where the MacCrimmons lived for several generations.

Many of these are preserved on Tobar an

Dualchais, Scotland's online sound archive hosting thousands of recordings from the SSS, BBC and Canna Collection. In one of these recordings, Murdo MacLeod ('a Bhig' 1883-1968) from Borreraig described the place where the MacCrimmons had taught - *Slochd nam Piobairean* ('The Piper's Hollow') – and told of how those at Dunvegan Castle could listen and dance to their playing which emanated from there.

In Angus MacKay's 'Ancient Piobaireachd' from 1838, *Slochd nam Piobairean* is referred to explicitly as the place where pupils would retire to practice their respective lessons on the chanter and occasionally play the full pipes.

In a more recent account of *Slochd nam Piobairean*, it was described as a being located on a precipitous ledge on a sea cliff; perhaps not an obvious place to play the pipes but it was said that a fairy had instructed that this was to be the location of where MacCrimmon's pupils were to play their last tune. Sadly, most of the *Slochd nam Piobairean* has since fallen into the sea.

Other place names and physical features in the landscape in and around Borreraig connect the past with the present and serve to maintain a cultural living memory of the MacCrimmon pipers.



Clach Mhor Mhic Criomainn

The ruins of the ‘college’ are still known and nearby is Clach Mhòr MhicCruimein (the Great Stone of MacCrimmon).

It is said that Padraig Mòr MacCrimmon, having grown fed up with his horse always pulling out its tether pin, rolled the stone over the pin to keep it in place, a considerable feat of strength. The horse managed to pull the rope hard enough to break it however and it is said that the pin had remained under the stone some 200 years before it was recovered and kept by a crofter living nearby.

There are caves below Borreraig – Ùamh na Piobairean and a little to the south, Ùamh na Calmain (the cave of pigeons) – the latter where the MacCrimmon daughters would steal away with a set of their father’s pipes, named ‘òinseach’, to play. Of course, I cannot speak of caves and piping without mentioning *Uamh an Oir*, the ‘Cave of Gold’ – but more on that later.

MacCrimmon Women

Before that, I want to return to the reference in ‘Ancient Piobaireachd’ to the MacCrimmon women who practiced in the cave of pigeons.

We are told here that the pipes were certainly played by women in the Highlands, especially after the harp went out of use (in the aftermath of the collapse of the Lordship of the Isles we can assume), and that at least some of MacCrimmon women were extremely proficient and taught students at the College when MacCrimmon himself was absent.

Interestingly, it is a Mrs Elizabeth or Ealasaid, MacKinnon, who is cited here as ‘the last who retained the family profession’ who, at the time of the writing of ‘Ancient Piobaireachd’ was able to ‘go through the intricacies of a piobaireachd’.

It is details like this that tend to be left out of the prevailing narrative, but which give a more human and culturally insightful understanding of the MacCrimmons and who amongst them carried the tradition through the generations.

There are plenty of other sidelights and perspectives from the local and wider Gaelic oral tradition concerning the MacCrimmons.



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PM William MacLean

PM William MacLean, a native of Raasay, was famous for his stories. He has been criticised for his tendency to exaggerate but I would suggest that this is a little unfair. Many of his stories, like so much of oral tradition, do not always hold up to careful scrutiny of dates, or other information or beliefs thought to be factual. Technically, I suppose they are largely apocryphal, but their importance is not in any way lessened by this. It is the message that comes across which is important and provides with a deeper understanding of cultural values and worldview perspectives.

Willie was recorded telling a number of stories concerning Calum MacRaibeirt or Malcolm Robertson, a skilled craftsman who had come to Skye from Mull. He was believed to have been an extremely good piper too, having been taught by the famed Rankin pipers in Mull and he was certainly known to the Mull piping tradition. Stories of Calum are still told in Skye. Willie tells us that he composed the tunes, 'Catherine's Lament' and another, 'Catherine's Salute' (to be found in Angus MacKay's MS) and explained that they both had been inspired by one of Calum's beloved cows...

Essentially the story is that, when the time came Calum had to sell the cow. He took it to the mart, presumably feeling quite sorry for himself, and when he came back he composed the tune Catherine's Lament.

But not too long after that there came a lowing outside, and his wife looked out and saw that Catherine had returned. So excited by this, and happy, Calum then wrote Catherine's Salute.

I don't know if many are familiar with Catherine's Salute. It is in Angus MacKay's Manuscript, and there is actually a good recording of it on *Tobar an Duilchais* of Willie MacLean playing it. It is worth a listen.

<https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/53095?l=en>

But Willie also told a story of an encounter between Calum and a MacCrimmon piper:

[<https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/53254?l=en>]

The story may well be apocryphal, but its meaning is clear – that there was at least one other piper in Skye who rivalled MacCrimmon and he wasn't even from the same island. He couldn't quite beat MacCrimmon when it came down to it, but the idea that someone, anyone, could come close is tantalising, simultaneously reinforcing the supremacy of the MacCrimmon tradition whilst allowing us to marvel at the masterfulness of this more relatable, mortal, folk hero.

The Fairy Bridge is well known in Skye, and particularly around the Dunvegan area, and has several other stories and legends associated with it.



The Fairy Bridge

But let's return to the legends surrounding the Silver Chanter that was gifted to a MacCrimmon long ago by a fairy, and from which the competition of the same name takes its inspiration. Stories connecting piping with the supernatural abound and emphasise the magical power of music. Examples of historic pipe chanters said to have been gifted from the fairies still exist – *am Feadan Dubh Chin Tàile* (The Black Chanter of Kintail of the MacRaes) and *am Feadan Dubh Chlann Chatain* (The Black Chanter of Clan Chattan). The tropical

hardwood used in these instruments probably dates them to the early decades of imported timber from the colonies; their unique dark appearance and unusually sonorous qualities were no doubt popularly rationalised as having come from the ‘otherworld’.

According to some, the MacCrimmon’s fairy chanter was also black in colour and its story of having been gifted to a MacCrimmon is described in several recordings on Tobar an Dualchais. More often, however, it is the innate *ability* to play which is the gift rather than a magical chanter. In these stories, of which there are many variants adapted to the localities in which they were told along with the relevant piping family – MacCrimmons in Duirinis in Skye, MacIntyres in South Uist and so on – a piper of poor ability but with strong determination meets a fairy who gives him his extraordinary skill but on certain conditions which he, or others in his family line, eventually break.

Moving from one motif to another takes us back into the caves.



We have probably all heard of one or more stories or songs named *Cha Till MacCruimein* or MacCrimmon will Never Return. They generally fall into one of two categories: the first concerns an unidentified MacCrimmon piper and invokes the legend of Uamh an Òir – The Cave of Gold. In this tale (again with

many variants and locations), the piper goes into a cave playing his pipes and does not return. Many songs include the following refrain that gives a sense of what might have befallen him:

Och ochain mi (x3)
'S mi gun trì làmhan

Dà làmh anns a' phìob (x3)
Is làmh sa claidheamh

‘Sorrowful am I that I have not three hands; two for the pipe and one on the sword’. MacCrimmon could not protect himself from the whatever mortal and supernatural dangers confronted him in the cave without the simultaneous magic of his piping and the use of his sword.

The richness of this story in Gaelic oral tradition is remarkable – there are Caves of Gold everywhere (there are at least three in Skye) and the stories and names of the piper adapted to suit the localities in which they were told – including Skye, Uist, Barra, Wester Ross and even clear on the other side of the country on the East Coast.



The second theme is based around Dòmhnall Bàn MacCrimmon who, as presaged, was killed at the Rout of Moy in 1746. Here, Dòmhnall Bàn accompanied a party of soldiers set on an ill-fated attempt to capture

the Prince just prior to Culloden.

A contemporary account tells us of how “A few hours previous to his being killed a Skye friend of MacCrimmon’s possessed the second-sight, chanced to meet the latter, who was a tall, well-built Highlander, in the streets of Inverness. On parting this individual (Patrick MacAskill) saw the piper ‘all at once contracted to the bigness of a boy of five or six years old’ and immediately, with the next look, resume his former size.” The nature of this vision was clearly understood to foretell death.

There are of course many other stories tied to both the Uamh an Òir and Dòmhnall Bàn themes. In Borreraig a story was told of a MacCrimmon who, on heading to one of the caves to play, met a fairy woman who told him that if his wife has laid everything out on the table for supper as usual, he will return. If anything were to be missing, however, he would not. As it happened, MacCrimmon's wife forgot to put butter on the table, and so he never returned.

The more general idea of a MacCrimmon going away never to return gained popularity during the nineteenth century and particularly so, it would seem, after Sir Walter Scott's song 'MacKrimmon's Lament' – vaguely reminiscent of the Dòmhnall Bàn motif – was published in 1818. Versions, in spoken word and song, spread far and wide and seem to have been popular with the Traveller Community as several wonderful recordings of the likes of Lizzie Higgins and Jeanie Robertson illustrate.

The theme is, of course, deeply metaphorical and echoed the catastrophic social upheaval which followed Culloden and saw, along with so much else, the destruction of the dynastic piping traditions. The fate of the MacCrimmons was summed up by the Scottish writer and editor, John Gibson Lockhart in his description of Dòmhnall Ruadh MacCrimmon in the early nineteenth century who, along with Iain Dubh were the last of the hereditary MacCrimmon pipers before the modern era: "He is an old ... lieutenant in the army, and a most capital piper, possessing about 200 tunes and pibrochs, most of which will probably die with him as he declines to have any of his sons instructed in the art."

In oral tradition, we hear of the musical power of the MacCrimmons ending after one of the later pipers of the family spoke ill of the fairy chanter causing it to be taken away along with the family's gift of extraordinary piping.

And that, I think it's fair to say, is where the story and our connection with the MacCrimmons ends for most of us. As we've just heard, however, the deep cultural connections between the stories, names and especially with the land itself remained with the generations of Sgiathanaich who followed and who endured institutional efforts to repress the Gaelic language, the clearances and other acute social upheavals. Indeed, it is in spite of – or perhaps to some extent, because of – this collective trauma that the stories and connections to the places associated with the MacCrimmons remained 'alive' and relevant.

Today, the population of indigenous Gaels continuing to live and work in the places of their birth is in rapid decline along with the intergenerational, holistic knowledge linking language, oral heritage, music and connections with the land.

In places like Borreraig, with its huge influx of holiday and second homes owned by individuals from elsewhere, the situation seems particularly bleak. The recent sale of the large estate in which it is situated, Husabost, to an absentee landlord was seen by some to be the final nail in the coffin.

Interestingly, however, the new owner has familial connections to the Martin family who owned the estate for several generations (and who instigated the building of the MacCrimmon Cairn and, later, the Penny and a Piobaireachd arrangement and the competition for junior pipers which ran in Husabost House for many years) and has been exploring ways of using the estate to help reconnect it with its piping roots. We'll see.

The picture is more promising elsewhere in Skye. There continues to be a large interest in learning the pipes generally, and there is excellent tuition to be had from the likes of Ian Ruairi Finlayson and Niall Stewart. Iain MacFadyen I might add, continues to teach in the area as well.



In some communities like Kilmuir in Trodairnis, effort has been made to support and encourage the younger generation's connection with their local piping traditions, and through the medium of Gaelic. It is this cultural link to piping in general, and ceòl mòr specifically, that needs support.

The potential to do more activities like this in local communities elsewhere in Skye is staggering – the MacKays in Raasay, Donald MacDonald around Glenhinnisdale and Kingsburgh, Calum Mòr MacInnes and his remarkable collection of tunes in Sleat and indeed, in Duirinish itself, the historical homeland of the MacCrimmons themselves.

I often think of the children in Skye who, every day, pass by the Fairy Bridge or past where the Battle of Waternish was fought and Trumpan, on their way to school with practice chanters in their rucksacks.

I hope they are as aware of the significance of these sites and their rich histories and connections to piping as older generations were, because having this knowledge adds to their sense of belonging and cultural identity and can make their overall musical experiences more enriching and meaningful.



I'm not sure how aware the wider piping world is of this, but as I have said, the Silver Chanter has done much to encourage a sense of pride with locals and help maintain a sense of connection with them and the music and broader heritage of the MacCrimmons.



I might add that it has also done a lot to raise awareness of this cultural heritage to those from outside of Skye, especially with pipers themselves who, over the years, have forged deeper connections with their music having visited and

performed in the historical homeland of the MacCrimmons and perhaps have experienced the beautiful humility of playing to those who were born into the culture from which ceòl mòr was created and who understand the tune names and stories of the music on a personal, socio-linguistic level.

The Piobaireachd Society can take pride in helping to ensure that the Silver Chanter remains in Skye. I might add though that there is a lot more that is needed to be done to ensure that future generations of Sgiathanaich – whether they are pipers or not – maintain their connection with ceòl mòr, working with schools and communities where the MacArthurs, MacKays, MacCrimmons and others once thrived. Could the Piobaireachd Society play a part in this? I will leave this for you to consider!