

Further Adventures of a Piobaireachd Nerd

John Frater

The challenge and delight that is the Nameless tune on page 96 of John MacDougall Gillies' manuscript, rescued from obscurity by Piobaireachd Society Bk16, illustrates the impact of our Collection.

When Book 16 was published in 2015, the Editor of Piping Press, no stranger, asked me to review. I'll paraphrase some key points.

Book 16 should provide:

- playable scores for interesting tunes
- encourage performance of rarely played tunes
- encourage Piobaireachd study and research

From my perspective, it succeeded.

My title for this brief contribution is intentionally light-hearted, but the content is rather nerdy.

The editors of Book 16 felt this tune's unusual structure was a significant factor in it being relatively unknown; they revised it extensively.

Some time after my review, spurred on by our President in Piping Press mode, I looked at MacDougall Gillies' score and found it attractive, but incomplete, so I prepared my own.

A later trigger for a thorough sorting was Bill Wotherspoon, recalling I had played the tune at Birnam, asking me to play it at our Newcastle Pipers' Club, an excellent monthly gathering, organised entirely by Bill, and a veritable hotbed of piobaireachd exploration!

Working with the Society's website image of MacDougall Gillies' score, my first challenge was this superscript, essentially illegible, which I interpreted as "2nd Bar 3rd Part", especially as there is an insertion mark at bar 2 line 3.

Later, when I sat in Glasgow University Library with MacDougall Gillies' manuscript, it was a great relief to confirm this!

Jack has obtained this improved scan for our website. Our thanks to Glasgow University Library for custodianship of the manuscript; and a big thank you to Jack for his work on the website.

The 2nd edition of Book 16 has the original Piobaireachd Society setting, plus a new, significantly different one, which inserts this bar. The only conscious change I made to MacDougall Gillies' score was also early in the tune, where I felt this gracenote group interrupted the flow.

Above this same bar is a mark, which only made sense to me when I sat in Glasgow University Library; the old scan ended here, but on the original manuscript.

I saw this footnote. MacDougall Gillies has crossed above rather than crossing out, so I assume he was undecided; his alternative bar could be used here and for the first bar, which carries a similar mark.

Next, L2 B6, repeated in line 3 similar bars have been encountered in L1 and appear again. Where a run up to high A first appears, although unpointed in the manuscript, I assumed the timing would match the previous bar – this is how I had learnt the tune from the original Bk16 and it works well.

Preparing this talk I realised that my dropping of that gracenote group in the next bar also derives from the first Piobaireachd Society setting.

Time for a general point. I had never heard of this tune until Book 16 appeared. There are many neglected piobaireachd that are rarely, if ever, played. I assume that the vast majority of tunes in books or manuscripts are worthwhile pieces from their composer's perspective.

Perhaps some are never going to gather a following; some are fine as they are and just need an airing; some have attractive elements, but somehow don't gel with the modern ear and it seems to me that new settings might be tried. T

he Book 16 editors decided MacDougall Gillies' Nameless tune would benefit from revision; they produced a substantially different score, while retaining plenty of the tune's good music.

Back to those runs to high A. MacDougall Gillies presents these differently from the others, but if this bar is played as written, the timing doesn't work for me. I like the shortening of the F giving the run up to high A a different character, but I prefer the HiA held longer, with low A as a big "and note".

Keep those two bars with runs to high A in mind. This is how MacDougall Gillies writes the first, then the same bar as presented in Bk16. MacDougall

Gillies' second version, which is the notation I don't like, plus some alternatives, including mine.

I assume that here, he wanted to show F, HiG & HiA as a connected run of notes, a wee musical entity, as does this notation; this might be closer to Gillies' desired note lengths, but it disconnects HiA from F&G.

I don't think this sort of beamed notation has ever caught on in piobaireachd; lots of conjecture there and possibly complete twaddle. The key point is that if MacDougall Gillies played these two bars with the same timing, surely he would have written them with the same timing. Neither Piobaireachd Society setting opts for a timing difference for which approach, as we shall see, there is precedent.

At the same point in line 3 of the variations an attractive turn occurs the crunluath footnote is written neatly; in the taorluath it's scruffy & partly crossed out, but I believe a grip from D to F is intended.

The first Piobaireachd Society setting omits these turns; the new setting has a taorluath rather than a grip. The mathematically minded amongst you may wonder about the bars assigned a 3/4 time signature? I confess here that my own initial transfer to a printed score had various inaccuracies, so I am not feeling smug! It's hard to produce a flawless piobaireachd score, even after multiple proof reading. This is my version.

Ok, I had prepared a score, based firmly on MacDougall Gillies' - how to present the unusual structure? I am open to suggestions!?

The variations have a melodic flow, with that attractive turn in the final few bars.

I had performed the Piobaireachd Society first setting, prepared and performed my interpretation of MacDougall Gillies; all sorted?!

In January 25, prompted by Conference regular Stephen Whitton asking about piobaireachd linked with Robert Meldrum, I was looking through Robert Meldrum's MS at the National Library in Edinburgh. Robert Meldrum died in 1942, well into what we might regard as modern times for piobaireachd, but when he was born, in 1851, Angus MacKay was still Queen Victoria's piper. Robert Meldrum knew John MacDougall Gillies well.

Sitting with Meldrum's manuscript, I came to the Rout of Glenlivet. Hang on a minute, this is Nameless page 96 of John MacDougall Gillies' MS! His footnote here implies that he named the tune; he was a native of Tomintoul and a soldier. Robert Meldrum is not known to have composed Piobaireachd - he himself mentions only light music, such as his superb 6/8 "Lillie Long Wade's Welcome to Inverness".

Roderick Cannon looked at Meldrum's manuscript long before Bk16, so not surprisingly he didn't make the connection with MacDougall Gillies' Nameless tune, but he did point out that the name for the tune in Meldrum's index is Lament for Castle Newe, crossed out and replaced with Lament for George, 5th Duke of Gordon, supporting the notion that Meldrum named the tune, having had a few goes at it.

Regarding the score, Meldrum does not have MacDougall Gillies' extra bar nor his twizzly bits in T&C; I regard those twizzles as a lovely musical touch, adding extra character. Note those two adjacent bars with runs to high A, the precedent I mentioned for the new Piobaireachd Society setting.

With the publication of Bk16 2nd edition, you have several settings on offer - Bk16 first edition, very much Piobaireachd Society own brand, MacDougall Gillies' Manuscript, Meldrum's Rout of Glenlivet and Piobaireachd Society 2025.

Do the modest differences between the latter three settings matter? Analysis of such minutiae has been a core feature of our books from the outset, the staple diet of the right hand page. Gleefully digested by a few, but of genuine value to everyone, if nurturing good music.

In conclusion, Nameless from MacDougall Gillies' manuscript illustrates our Piobaireachd Society books influencing what we play, how we play it, and stimulating thoroughly enjoyable piobaireachd research.

As always, constructive dialogue is welcome!