

*Brìgh 'Chiùil:*  
Vernacular Ear-Learned Piping in Cape  
Breton and South Uist  
Explored through *Seanchas*-Based  
Narratives<sup>1</sup>

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Throughout the growing interest in the study of vernacular forms of intangible performance culture, i.e. the verbal arts, instrumental music and dance, in both the Old and New World Scottish *Gàidhealtachd*, attention has traditionally focused on the collection of the traditions themselves, often treating them as curiosities held within a Victorian curio-cabinet. However, little consideration has been given to local perceptions of these traditions, capable of revealing their function, meaning and context within the communities that have intergenerationally maintained them. This deficiency correlates with trends in broader scholarship concerning both verbal arts and instrumental music traditions in an oral/aural framework of transmission. Recently however, local aesthetics and thought have gradually come to be understood as essential components in examining and understanding any given tradition, and have begun to be discussed as distinct areas of inquiry in their own right (Finnegan: 131). John Shaw, in his “Language, Music and Local Aesthetics: Views from Gaeldom and Beyond”, notes the growing importance of such research and discusses how, within a Scottish Gaelic context where informants have grown scarcer in recent decades, these narratives can be compiled and compared to contribute in revealing broader unities of perception and understanding of these cultural practices:

If we accept that informants are capable of providing useful insights into their native culture, then internal views on ‘local aesthetics’, particularly when they appear with some consistency, can suggest relationships within the tradition that would otherwise be apparent to the outside researcher only after lengthy investigation. (1992/1993: 37)

Shaw’s seminal article concerning communal aesthetics among Scottish Gaels, along with several studies that have appeared in print over the past several decades,<sup>2</sup> have made valuable contributions in terms of recording and employing oral narratives concerning various forms of cultural expression. Such narratives on local aesthetics fall within the realm of *seanchas*, which can denote both communal knowledge and the act of verbally communicating such knowledge among members of the same community, thus serving as a means of reinforcing and transmitting shared identity and aesthetic acceptability within communities.<sup>3</sup> *Seanchas* narratives can also occur between fieldworker and tradition-bearer in the course of emic-based research, where the researcher can take on the role of student, and it is such narratives that form the basis of the research presented in this article.

Although, as noted earlier, the tradition-bearers available to us today for consultation of their traditions are relatively few, the current generation of Gaelic-

speaking elders in these communities appear to universally recall a time when the various genres of performance culture functioned in tandem, maintaining a unity in the nature of their expression and revealing a distinct cultural cosmos among Scottish Gaels at the communal level.<sup>4</sup> Theresa Burke, née MacNeil, styled in her native language as *Treasag ni'n Pheadair Mhòir Steaphain Mhìcheil*, of the Rear Big Pond, Cape Breton, recalled gatherings at her childhood home where various forms of Scottish Gaelic cultural expression occurred under the same roof in the course of an evening:

**Theresa:** *Bhiodh luadh shìos a's a' chidsin, no 's a' cheann-shìos, 's dannsa shuas air a' lobhtaidh a's an aon oidhche. Yeah, bhiodh sin againn a ch-uile bliadhna—luadh, daoine 'gabhail òran. Shin far an cuala sinn na h-òran uileadh, duine mu seach 'gabhail òran.*

**Tiber:** *Bha sibh làn a' chiùil.*

**Theresa:** *Bha a ch-uile duine... Gàidhlig a bh'aig a ch-uile duine, òg 's sean. Bha saoghal math an uair sin. Cha robh mòran eagail ort.*<sup>5</sup>

**Theresa:** There would be a milling frolic [waulking] down in the kitchen, or in the living room, and a dance up in the loft in the one night. Yeah, we would have that every year, a milling frolic, people singing songs. That was where we heard all the songs, one person after another singing songs.

**Tiber:** You were full of music.

**Theresa:** Everyone was... everyone had Gaelic, young and old. The world was good at that time. You didn't fear much.

Theresa's commentary reveals the value of *seanachas*-based narratives from native Scottish Gaelic-speaking tradition-bearers in not only understanding the internal perceptions of tradition but also in verbally demonstrating cultural attitudes within Scottish Gaeldom. The identified importance of the overarching Gaelic cultural cosmos discussed above will be kept in mind throughout this paper, although only one aspect of its whole will be discussed, namely traditional bagpiping<sup>6</sup> in Uist (Outer Hebrides) and Cape Breton Island, Canada.

Associations and cultural correlations between ethnically kindred communities in Cape Breton and Scotland have never been fully explored. Linguistically, dialectal similarities in the Scottish Gaelic of certain districts in Cape Breton still correspond to, and maintain traits of, their districts of origin; i.e. one can still find aspects of Barra Gaelic in the Gaelic of Christmas Island and Iona, of Mainland Lochaber and Moidart Gaelic in Inverness County, and to a certain degree South Uist Gaelic in Boisdale, Cape Breton.<sup>7</sup> It should also be noted that the Cape Breton Gaels considered here represent the final generation of first-language Scottish Gaelic-speakers in Nova Scotia with a linguistic tradition that can trace its origins in an unbroken line back to emigration from the Highlands and Islands of Scotland in the first half of the nineteenth century.

The island communities of South Uist and Cape Breton were chosen for examination not only because of their rich cultural and linguistic traditions but also because many of the last of the ear-learned dance pipers of Cape Breton traced their ancestry back to South Uist. Maintaining that community is an essential factor in the successful transmission of all cultural forms, and in light of the survival of certain representative dialectal distinctiveness in the language of some of these communities extant to this day, the author considers it possible to discover aesthetic similarities in

the vernacular piping styles of South Uist and kindred communities descended from Uist emigrants in Cape Breton through the use of *seanchas* narratives. Such narratives, recorded by the author over the past three years from Scottish Gaelic-speakers in Cape Breton Island, and South Uist, Benbecula and North Uist, Scotland concerning their communities' traditional piping, along with transcriptions of archive recordings, will be employed in order to reveal similarities in attitudes towards this recently lost art-form.

This article begins by discussing the relationship between Uist and Cape Breton through the emigration of pipers, continues by examining narratives from two of the latest practitioners of ear-learned dance piping of Uist and Cape Breton, and goes on to consider commentary and reminiscences of ear-learned dance-pipers in their communities from some of the last musicians of Uist and Cape Breton for whom Gaelic was their first language. The paper concludes by reflecting on some of the distinctive traits of vernacular dance piping. The voices of those who played the music, along with those who remembered listening and dancing to it, form the article's basis, providing us with insight to the nature and function of the ear-learned dance piper in the Old and New World *Gàidhealtachds*.

The emigrant connections between South Uist and the Canadian Maritimes were strong from quite early on, with some of the first of these settlers arriving in the first wave of emigration, as early as 1772 in Prince Edward Island.<sup>8</sup> This was followed by the larger scale emigrations to Cape Breton and Eastern Nova Scotia in the first half of the nineteenth century. An agent of Clanranald's South Uist holdings in 1827 provides insight into the harsh realities faced by many emigrants to Cape Breton:

The people of this country [South Uist] will all go to Cape Breton, and nowhere else if they can help it. They are accustomed to live at home almost exclusively on meal and milk and potatoes. The expense therefore of sending them across the Atlantic will be much less than that of transporting the same number of people from England. I am of the opinion that from 30s to £2 would feed a full-grown Highlander for the ordinary voyage to Cape Breton and I should imagine ampill [*sic*] might be freighted for about 40s each passenger. If you substitute molasses for the milk they are accustomed to at home, and lay in a sufficient quantity of good meal for the voyage, I do not think more will be necessary. (qtd. in Campbell: 19)

Included in this major exodus from South Uist to Cape Breton were pipers, transplanting their social role and contributing to the social fabric of the New World *Gàidhealtachd*.<sup>9</sup> Not only do many of the present day Cape Breton Gaels of South Uist descent maintain memory of their forbears' emigration from Scotland, but they also recall emigrant and first generation pipers of South Uist background being vital assets to their communities.

Joe Peter MacLean, styled *Eòs Peadar mac Theàrlaich 'ic Eòis Pheadair Theàrlaich*, an accomplished exponent of traditional fiddling in Boisdale, Cape Breton, whose forbears emigrated from Frobost, South Uist in the 1820s, and Angus Joseph Currie, styled *Aonghas mac Dhùghaill 'ic Aonghais Lachlainn Aonghais*, of North Side East Bay, Cape Breton, also of South Uist descent, recalled a MacLean piper in their local community, known as *Seonaidh Chaluum Ruaidh*, who as noted below was either an emigrant direct from South Uist or of the first generation born in Cape Breton.<sup>10</sup>

**Jim Watson:** *A' Seonaidh Chaluum Ruaidh a bha seo, an ann às an t-Seann Dùthaich-fhèin a bha e?*

**Angus Joseph Currie:** *'S ann.*

**Joe Peter MacLean:** *'Athair a thàinig a-nall.*

**JW:** *Bha sibhse ga chluinneadh a' cluich, a' seinn na pìobadh?*

**AJC:** *Seadh.*

**JW:** *An tigeadh e dhan taigh agaibh dìreach airson a bhith...? Thigeadh e air chèilidh.*

**AJC:** *O thigeadh! Thigeadh e air chèilidh.*

**JPMcL:** *Thigeadh e air chèilidh. Oh yes, uaireannan thigeadh.*

**JW:** *A' faca sibh riamh e, fhad 's a bha e 'cluich ann an taigh sam bith, daoine 'step-adh fhad 's a bha e 'cluich?*

**AJC:** *O bhithheadh, bhiodh. Bha feadhainn ann. Bha mo mhàthair.*

**JPMcL:** *Bhiodh.*

**JW:** *Bhiodh esan a' cluich 's bhiodh cuideigin a' step-adh?*

**AJC:** *Bhithheadh, dìreach, bhithheadh.<sup>11</sup>*

**Jim Watson:** This Seonaidh Chaluum Ruaidh, did he come from the Old Country?

**Angus Joseph Currie:** Yes.

**Joe Peter MacLean:** [It was] his father that came over.

**JW:** You heard him playing the pipes?

**AJC:** Yes.

**JW:** Would he come to the house just to be...? He would come to visit.

**AJC:** Oh yes! He would come to visit.

**JPMcL:** He would come to visit. Oh yes, sometimes.

**JW:** Did you ever see, as long as he was playing in any house, people step-dancing as he played?

**AJC:** Yes, yes. Some were there. My mother was.

**JPMcL:** Yes.

**JW:** He would be playing and someone would be step-dancing?

**AJC:** Yes, exactly, yes.

This commentary is a remarkable one in that it links an early Cape Breton piper's playing aesthetic for dance-piping as corresponding to the rhythms of step-dancing<sup>12</sup> in Boisdale, Cape Breton, in living memory. Regardless of *Seonaidh Chaluum Ruaidh*'s place of birth, the above narrative reveals him as a piper who was either adaptive to differing forms of dance or was already familiar with the tempos and rhythms of step-dance music, preceding the introduction of formal and standardized methods of literate piping that entered Uist in the following decades.

The dawn of the twentieth century brought with it to South Uist, and a few decades later to Cape Breton, the introduction of formal literate tuition of the Great Highland Bagpipe. In South Uist specifically, this was accomplished through a series of piping tutors sent by the Piobaireachd Society, commencing in 1909 with Pipe Major John MacDonald of Inverness, all of whose efforts, as John Gibson argues, “worked to displace from prominence the older sense of complete Gaelic musicality that had been the prime Gaelic prerequisite, and that had driven a thousand unselfconscious traditional dance-music pipers of earlier times” (1998: 252). This transition between an orally/aurally transmitted style of piping and the competitive

literate tradition was perhaps a more gradual one that did not undermine ‘Gaelic’ musicality as drastically and instantaneously as previously thought.

In Gaelic Scotland, even with the introduction of formal literate piping, an almost universal term still exists in the aesthetic vocabulary of Southern Outer Hebridean Gaels to describe and distinguish an aurally transmitted piping style in comparison with a literate: *ceòl cluaiseadh*, or ‘ear music’. The use of the term in South Uist, Benbecula and North Uist would infer that both the literate and aural piping on these islands coexisted for several decades and that there was a need to differentiate them; otherwise the simple term *ceòl* ‘music’ would suffice. Joshua Dickson also likens the style of piping denoted by *ceòl cluaiseadh*<sup>13</sup> as sharing similarities with the aurally transmitted instrumental dance music of Cape Breton (8). However, such terminology is not recorded among Cape Breton Gaels, who have more universal Scottish Gaelic expressions to denote the acceptability of music according to their communal aesthetics, such as *blas*, ‘flavour’ or ‘taste’, or *ceòl ceart*,<sup>14</sup> ‘proper’ or ‘genuine’ music (Shaw 1992/1993: 43), or more recently *ceòl a’s an t-seann dòigh*, ‘music in the old fashion’, as noted by Joe Peter MacLean,<sup>15</sup> one of Cape Breton’s last Gaelic-speaking fiddlers. However, it is the survival of the term *ceòl cluaiseadh* among Uist’s Gaels and the possibility that it could share links with the ear-learned dance-piping of Cape Breton that motivated the author to undertake fieldwork on the topic.

Before looking to the more recent personal fieldwork undertaken over the last three years, it would be appropriate to examine some valuable narratives from two of the latest practitioners of aurally transmitted piping, namely Kenneth Morrison of Griminis, North Uist and Alex Currie of Frenchvale, Cape Breton. The recording of Kenneth Morrison from the School of Scottish Studies Sound Archive is the only known recording of a *piobaire cluaiseadh*, or ear-learned piper, from Uist (Dickson 207). The Chronological Register of Sound Recordings provides some remarkable information concerning Kenneth Morrison, with the following note: “Ear Piper. Cannot speak nor read English. Cannot read Gaelic. Monoglot.” In the interview recorded in 1970 in Lochboisdale, South Uist by Peter Cooke, with the assistance of John MacLean, Kenneth Morrison recalls the changes that occurred with the introduction of literate piping to the islands. He also recalls having played for dances at the Taigh Ghearraidh School House in North Uist. In a recent interview with piper Tommy MacLellan of Huna, North Uist, styled *Tomaidh mac Dhòmhnaill ‘ic Aonghais ‘ic Dhòmhnaill*, he confirmed that Kenneth Morrison often played for local dances, noting, “‘S e piobaire cluaiseadh a bh’ann. ‘S e ceòl cluaiseadh a bh’aige. Bha e gu math ceòlmhor ‘s tha mi ‘tuigsinn na latha gu robh feum mhòr airson chluichd aig na dannsaichean” [He was an ear-learned piper and I understand in his day that there was a great need for him to play at the dances].<sup>16</sup> Tommy also went on to note Kenneth’s remarkable ability at picking up tunes, stating, “‘Bhiodh am port aige nan cluinneadh e dà thurais e, chluicheadh e dìreach. Abair thusa, bha cluas mhath aige! [He would have the tune if he would hear it two times, he would play it spot on. Let me tell you he had a good ear!].” The combination of being both a monoglot speaker of Scottish Gaelic and an ear-learned dance-piper of North Uist<sup>17</sup> background in the 1970s makes Kenneth an individual of notable significance. He performs several selections of pipe music, which appear to have been influenced by literate piping repertoire, and it has been argued that these tunes are not representative of the *ceòl cluaiseadh* tradition and that their performance might have been done to impress his academic interviewers (Dickson 208).<sup>18</sup> However, it should be noted that he discusses having received a good portion of his tunes from gramophone recordings

of Pipe Major William Ross,<sup>19</sup> which perhaps had a standardizing effect on his piping:

*Bha mise cluinntinn na records aige [aig Pipe Major Ross], records air gramophone, 's ann a bhithinn ga chluinntinn. Bha feadhainn ag innse dhomh a bha eòlach air gu robh e 'g atharrachadh nam port agus a' cur tionnadaichean eile riuth'. [...] 'S ann bho na gramophones a bhithinnsa 'togail nam port, fhios agad, na puirt cinnteach. Na puirt cinnteach a bh'ann, 's ann bho na gramophones a bha sinn gan togail, mi-fhèin agus gillean eile, ag obair air togail bho na gramophones a bha sin. Och uill, dh'fhalbh sin a bhalaich.*<sup>20</sup>

I was listening to his [Pipe Major William Ross's] records, gramophone records; that's where I would be hearing him. There were some who knew him who were telling me that he was changing the tunes and putting other turns to them. It was from the gramophones that I would be taking the tunes, you know, the exact tunes. The exact tunes that were there, it was from the gramophones that we were getting them, myself and other boys, working at picking them up from those gramophones. Oh well, that's gone lad.

This narrative reveals the consciousness that Kenneth Morrison had concerning the changes his tradition was undergoing, providing invaluable insight into a *piobaire cluaiseadh*'s perceptions of his tradition. He cites Pipe Major William Ross's notorious skill at collecting and altering tunes from the traditional repertoire in Uist<sup>21</sup> and goes on to note, "*Mar a bha am port air a dhèanamh an toiseach, 's ann as fheàrr e*" [The way the tune was made initially is the best]. Kenneth Morrison's repeated use of the phrase *na puirt cinnteach*, literally 'the exact tunes', in reference to the standardized and literate form of piping heard from the gramophones should also be noted. This could suggest a standardization that developed when recorded music entered the realm of aural transmission of piping on Uist, allowing a set version of a tune to be heard repeatedly with exactitude; much like reading a tune's score from the staff.

It could be that Kenneth Morrison's links with the *ceòl cluaiseadh* tradition were weakened when fewer of its practitioners were extant in the Uist dance and *cèilidh* circuits to maintain the traditional methods of transmission. He alludes to this and the traditional methods in which he received his tunes at first in the following narrative:

**Kenneth Morrison:** *Nuair a bha mise òg b'fheàrr leamsa a' phìob mhòr a chluichd na feadan. B'fhasa dhomh ga cluich 's chluichinnsa na b'fheàrr i cuideachd na feadan. 'S thogainn na puirt nam biodh piobair' eile 'cluichd ann a shin agus bhithinnsa dìreach ga watchadh ann a shin. Cho luath dìreach 's a leigeadh e a-nuas a' phìob, leigeadh e sìos a' phìob, dìreach bhiodh e agam as a' mhionaid, [...] a' cluichd fear no dhà. Bha an gnothach agam an uair sin. Ach nan cluinninn na sean phuirt a dh'ionnsaich mi ann an toiseach mar siod, nan cluinninn an-dràs'd' iad gan cluich aig duin' eil', bhiodh iad agam a's a' mhionaid.*

**John MacLean:** *Thigeadh iad air ais 'ugaibh.*

**KM:** *Thigeadh.*<sup>22</sup>



**Kenneth Morrison:** When I was young I preferred playing the Great Highland Pipes than the practice chanter. It was easier for me to play it and I would also play it better than the chanter. And I would pick up the tunes if there would be another piper playing there and I would be just watching him there just as soon as he would let the pipes down, I would just have it immediately, playing one of two. I had the calling then. But if I would hear the old tunes I learned in that way at first, if I would hear them now being played by another person, I would have them immediately.

**John MacLean:** They would come back to you.

**KM:** Yes.

Kenneth Morrison's comments here provide insight into the nature of the transmission of *ceòl chluiseadh*, in the mind of its practitioner, an area of research that is under-investigated in all aspects of Scottish Gaelic tradition. In the above narrative he is noting the importance of having other practitioners of his art-form in order to maintain it. It should also be noted that Kenneth Morrison discusses both visual and aural aspects concerning the transmission of tunes, sharing parallels with the transmission of other forms Scottish Gaelic performance culture.<sup>23</sup> In both of the narratives examined here, Kenneth Morrison employs various forms of the verbs *togail*, literally 'lifting', and in the second narrative of *ionnsachadh*, 'learning', which can denote informal and formal forms of transmission in broader Gaelic contexts.<sup>24</sup> Although a good portion of Kenneth Morrison's repertoire came from gramophone records, there were still ear-learned dance-piper's in Uist emigrant communities in the later part of the twentieth century who received most of their tunes in their communal repertoire through these traditional methods.

Alex Currie of Frenchvale, Cape Breton, like Kenneth Morrison, was one of the last practitioners of ear-learned dance-piping in his district, yet he recalls more aurally and also orally based methods by which his tunes were passed on to him. Alex grew up in a household where both of his parents still spoke Gaelic, and his mother would sing pipe-tunes to him as his father would accompany them with step-dancing. He describes the method by which he learned his piping as follows:

Here's the way I learned: My mother would jig the tune as it was written in the olden days [...]. She jigged in words—in Gaelic. She pronounced the notes in Gaelic, and the note would be the same as it would be written in the book! The old people who came over from Scotland—her father and grandfather—they took that over here with them. She couldn't play the pipes, though. But if I wouldn't hit a note right, she'd say, 'That's not right! You gotta put a little more stir to it—a little livelier.' In that way I had the tunes more accurate than the ones in the books! But she had *no* books; it was all in her head! She'd jig tunes night and day; she had all kinds of them. I know that when I was in my early twenties I could play the pipes *all* night and a different tune each time, and I got a lot of those tunes from her.<sup>25</sup> (MacGillivray 208-209)

Although Alex Currie employs literate vocabulary, such as the tunes being written in books, there is no question that he is stressing the importance and accuracy of having heard the tunes from his mother's singing. It should also be noted that Alex could not read or write music in spite of his commentary. John MacLean, a grand-nephew of

Alex and a grandson of his brother Paddy and an accomplished piper in his own right, also maintains that some of the Currie brothers' piping came directly from a MacKinnon who emigrated from South Uist to Cape Breton.<sup>26</sup>

The Currie Pipers of Frenchvale were descended from Curries, MacMullins and MacIntyres who had arrived in Cape Breton from South Uist in the early nineteenth-century (MacMillan, *A West Wind to East Bay*). Alex and Paddy Currie's great-grandfather on their paternal side, *Lachlann mac Iain 'ic Dhonnchaidh 'ic Sheumais*, arrived in Cape Breton from South Uist in 1808 (MacMillan 63). In the early 1990s, Alex was given a great deal of attention by academics and musicians alike searching for an older 'Gaelic' style of piping, including pipers Hamish Moore<sup>27</sup> of Dunkeld, Scotland and Barry Shears<sup>28</sup> of Halifax, Nova Scotia. Several published interviews<sup>29</sup> with Alex concerning his tradition along with a large surviving number of recordings of Alex's and his brother Paddy's piping made by family and friends are available<sup>30</sup>. The Currie brothers' piping was in popular demand in and around their district of Cape Breton, including Boisdale and also Christmas Island, as a well known Gaelic-singer of the district, Peter Jack MacLean, styled *Peadar Jack mac Pheadair 'ic Chalum Ghobha*, noted,

*Nuair a bhiodh esan [Paddy Currie] a' seinn, bhiodh e math, ceòl na pìobadh aigesan! Oh bha deagh cheòl aige. [...] Uill, bha na Curries, tha 'n t-seansa, muinntir cho math a thigeadh mun cuairt. Bha an ceòl unnta 's bha ceòl aca 's rachadh aca air pìobaireachd! [...] Bha deagh cheòl aca 's bha deagh phuirt aca 's bha iad uileadh math.*<sup>31</sup>

When he [Paddy Currie] would be playing it would be good, the pipe music he had! Oh he had good music. Well the Curries were, I suppose, some of the best that would come around. Music was in them and they had music and they could pipe! They had good music and good tunes and they were all good.

If Alex and Paddy Currie's piping was the latest survival of this older style of 'Gaelic' orally/aurally transmitted piping, known in Uist as *ceòl cluaiseadh* and at one time extant in both Uist and Cape Breton, the remaining Gaelic-speaking musicians of both areas should be able to provide valuable *seanachas* on the nature of Alex's piping style.

It was all the above reasons that made the music of Alex and Paddy Currie a perfect means of entering discussion with Uist and Cape Breton tradition-bearers concerning their own communities' ear-learned dance-pipers, or *pìobairean cluaiseadh*. In the summer of 2006 the author set out with the recordings of Alex Currie and Paddy to South Uist to interview some of the last Gaelic-speakers with knowledge of this music. Tradition-bearers were sought out who not only had Scottish Gaelic and knowledge of pipe music, but also who heard in their youth some of the last *pìobairean cluaiseadh* on the island prior to the 1950s when the bagpipe was displaced from prominence by the piano-accordion and *cèilidh* band for local dances. After playing excerpts of Alex Currie's piping, Rona Lightfoot, a well-known piper and singer of the MacDonalds of Garryhellie in South Uist, responded with this, "*Bhithheadh na seann daoine, sin mar a bhithheadh iad a' cluich. 'S ann, 's ann, tha e uamhasach coltach ris*" ["The old people would be, that is how they would play. Indeed, it is quite similar"].<sup>32</sup> Rona and the other tradition-bearers were from a post-World War II era of piping in South Uist, a time when pipes were still the instrument for dance and when Bob Nicol, the famous instructor of *ceòl mòr*, came



from the Royal Balmoral Estate in Aberdeenshire to South Uist to provide tuition to many of my informants in the 1950s. The narratives that follow are reminiscences of South Uist's *piobairean cluaiseadh*, brought to mind upon hearing recordings of the Currie brothers' piping from Frenchvale.

The late Calum Beaton, *Calum mac Eairdsidh Choinnich 'ic Alasdair 'ic Ruairidh 'ic Ruairidh*, of Stoneybridge, South Uist was well versed in all aspects of the instrument and was another student of Nicol's piping classes (Dickson 132-4). He was also a noted player for community dances and although he received formal tuition, his father, Archie Beaton, was a practitioner of *ceòl cluaiseadh* (Dickson 114-5), who transmitted many of his dance tunes to Calum, as he noted in an interview with the author.<sup>33</sup> This excerpt from a conversation with Calum provides us with some insight into the way he viewed *ceòl cluaiseadh* in South Uist:

*Nuair a thòisich iad a' seo an toiseach, ceòl cluaiseadh a chanadh iad ris, playing by ear. Ach 's e bha diofair, cha mhòr a h-uile duine. Ach nuair a thòisich feadhainn a dhol dhan airm thug iad staff-notation 's rudan mar sin. Ach an toiseach, 'se, mar a chanadh iad, 'se ceòl cluaiseadh a bh'ann. [...] O, chuala mise gu leòr dhiubh sin a' cluich agus bha feadhainn dhiubh glè mhath. Bha iad math. Bha, mar a chanamaid, 'time' aca. Bha iad air leth math. Bha togail aca, aig na puirt, nach cluinn thu 's dòcha an-diugh idir. [...] 'S iad a b' fheàrr leis na dannsairean nuair a bhiodh iad a' cluich le ceòl cluaiseadh, mar gum biodh e gan togail na b' fheàrr airson dannsa.*<sup>34</sup>

When they began here at first, *ceòl cluaiseadh* they would call it, playing by ear. But that's what was different, almost with everyone. But when some began to go to the army they took staff-notation and things like that. But at first, it was, as they would say, it was *ceòl cluaiseadh*. Oh, I heard plenty of them playing and some of them were very good. They were good. They, as we would say, had good timing. They were especially good. They had a lift, the tunes, that you perhaps won't hear at all today. They were preferred by the dancers when they would be playing *ceòl cluaiseadh*, as it would be lifting them better for dancing.

Calum Beaton's narrative demonstrates an indigenous Gaelic aesthetic sensitive to the nuances of music and how pipers that played in this orally/aurally transmitted style were the preferred accompaniment for dancing. His use of the verbal-noun *togail* has parallels in its usage among Cape Breton's Gaels, referring to the "...invigorating rhythmic 'lift' that is the hallmark of the respected local fiddler, and translates into Cape Breton English as 'swing'" (Shaw 1992/1993: 43). Calum Beaton confirmed these parallels in musical aesthetic between Cape Breton and South Uist on several occasions, when he likened the swing in Alex and Paddy Currie's piping to the swing of the *piobairean cluaiseadh* he heard in South Uist, noting recently "*Bha e caran an aon rud. Cha robh mòran diofair ann. [...] Bha togail aca*" [It was sort of the same thing. There wasn't much difference. They had swing].<sup>35</sup> Calum Beaton in the same interview also likened Alex Currie's rhythmic foot accompaniment to other pipers who played seated for dancing in Uist, including *Aonghas 'an Gighat'* Campbell<sup>36</sup> of Iochdar, after seeing a video<sup>37</sup> of Alex Currie playing.

Neil MacMillan of Gearraidh Bhailteas, South Uist, styled *Niall Sheonaidh Nill*, who learned to play the pipes alongside his friend Calum Beaton in Bob Nicol's

classes noted a strong difference between literate and oral methods of piping. Neil's commentary recalls a time when *ceòl cluaiseadh* was widely practiced throughout the Scottish *Gàidhealtachd*, including the neighbouring mainland districts of Clanranald, stating, “‘*Se an aon rud a bh’aca ’s cha robh e gu diofair cà’ robh thu, ach na seann phìobairean, sin caran an aon rud a bh’aca air an taobh eile cuideachd, ann am Mùideart ’s Cnòideart ’s na h-àiteachan a bha sin. Cha bhiodh iad ach a’ cluich ris a’ chluas*” [It was the one thing they had and it didn’t make a difference where you were, but the old pipers, that’s somewhat the same thing they had on the other side as well in, in Moidart and Knoydart and those places. They would just be playing by ear]. Neil MacMillan, once Pipe Major of the 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> Cameron Highlanders (Innes 25), notices from first hand experience the strong divisions between the competitive literate piping tradition heard today and the older relationship between piping and the Gaelic language:

*Bha ’phìobaireachd na bu làidir’. Bhiodh iad a’ cluichd pìobaireachd cuideachd a’s an t-seann aimsir a bha sineach. Bha iad a’ toir barrachd às a’ cheòl o chionn ’s a tha diubhair pìobaireachd ann a’ staff-notation co-dhiubh. [...] Tha iad a’ cluichd a h-uile sion air a’ pìobaireachd sin cho square, ’fhios agad, mar gum bitheadh e dìreach cut out of paper. Chan ann mar sin a bha feadhainn dhiubh ga cluichd idir ach bha iad a’ leantail an òrain. [...] Chan eil thu ’toir an òrain am bàrr idir, ’s cha robh pìobaireachd a bha ’sineach nach robh faclan rithe. Shin agad. Chan ann ach mar gum biodh tu ’cur òrain... mar gum bitheadh tu ’cur naidheachd air a’ phìob. Bha ’Ghàidhlig ’s a’ pìobaireachd a’ dol còmhla, fhios agad, ach chan eil an-diugh. Chan eil guth air. [...] Tha e cho square ri bocsa. Chan eil ann ach dìreach to be finger perfect, sin agad a’ rud. Chan eil thu ’toir na brìgh às, brìgh ’chiùil às idir.<sup>38</sup>*

The piping was stronger. They would be playing pipe music in that old method. They were getting more out of the music than since there is a difference of piping in staff-notation. They are playing everything in that piping so square, you know, as if it were just cut out of paper. It wasn’t like that that some of them were playing at all but they were following the song. You aren’t putting the song first, and there wasn’t pipe tune that there weren’t words to. There you have it. There isn’t but as if you would be putting a song... as if you would be putting a story on the pipes. Gaelic and piping went together, you know, but not today. There isn’t a word about it. It is as square as a box. It’s only about being finger perfect, that’s the thing. You are not getting the essence out of it, the essence of the music out of it at all.

Neil MacMillan’s above commentary provides some powerful insight into the divorce that has occurred between piping and the Gaelic language, and brings to mind the continuum of Scottish Gaelic intangible culture noted earlier. Neil’s use of the noun *brìgh*,<sup>39</sup> which can denote ‘essence’, ‘vigour’, and moreover as conveying ‘meaning’ or ‘story’ in the Gaelic verbal arts (MacLellan 24; Ó Laoire 79-80), provides some important aesthetic vocabulary for describing *ceòl cluaiseadh*, especially when juxtaposing it against a competitive style of piping.

*Brìgh*, fits John Miles Foley’s discussion of word power, acting as a lexeme capable of “summon[ing] enormous meaning, as word-power effectively takes

advantage of the medium's limitations to convey information and experience in a densely packed code" (Foley 1995: 110). Another example of the use of the word comes from Peter Jack MacLean, who noted, "*Ma tha thu 'dol fhaighinn brigh nan òran agus a' Ghàidhlig, feumaidh tu 'tòiseachadh nuair a tha thu òg mar a thoisich sinn uileadh agus am measg nan daoine ga bruidhinn 's ga labhairt. Gheobh thu an uair sin e*" [If you are going to get the essence of the songs and the Gaelic language, you must start when you are young as we all were when we started, among the people conversing and speaking in the language. You'll get it then].<sup>40</sup> In this instance, *brigh* denotes a quality in performance that is achieved through being immersed in a Gaelic-speaking community, being an encultured member of that community. In many ways, the use of the noun *brigh* along with the accompanying attitudes held by Peter Jack share parallels with Neil MacMillan's description of aurally transmitted dance-piping in Uist, emphasising the central role of community in the transmission of culture.

Catriona Garbutt, née Campbell, of Uachdar, Benbecula, styled *Catriona ni'nn Chaluim Iain Chaluim Bhig 'ic Alasdair 'ic Chaluim Ruaidh*, a noted tradition-bearer of Gaelic-song and piping, similarly discusses the changes caused by the gradual removal of ear-learned piping from its position of prominence as the preferred accompaniment to communal dancing in Uist, demonstrating a shift in the attitudes of locals towards the *piobairean cluaiseadh* in the second half of the twentieth century:

*'S e 'phìob a bhiodh iad a' cleachdadh aig dannsaichean. 'S ann dhan dannsa a bha na puirt. Dh'fheumadh iad [na piobairean cluaiseadh] a bhith caran adaptive airson an dannsa. Cha bhiodh iad [na puirt] idir sgrìobhte. Bhiodh iad gan ionnsachadh bho 'chèile. [...] Ach a-rithist bhiodh iad [na piobairean cluaiseadh] diùid agus cha bhiodh iad ro dhèidheil air cluichd aig cèilidh no dannsa mar sin. 'S ann gun cluinne' tu 's gu robh iad caran gun fhiosda agus bha daoine caran 'coimhead caran sìos orra, 'fhios agad, 'Cha robh e math idir nuair a bha iad a' cluichd ceòl cluaiseadh,' this was the idea.<sup>41</sup>*

It was the pipes that they would be using at the dances. The tunes were for dancing. They had to be somewhat adaptive for the dances. They [the tunes] would not be written at all. They [the ear-learned pipers] would be learning them from each other. But again, they would be shy and they would not be too fond of playing at a *cèilidh* or dance like that. Indeed, you would hear that they were somewhat ignorant and that people were sort of looking down on them, you know, "It wasn't good at all when they were playing *ceòl cluaiseadh*," - this was the idea.

It should also be noted that Catriona's father, Calum Campbell, although a literate piper, learned much of his repertoire of what Catriona terms *na puirt bheaga*, or 'the small tunes', from local *piobairean cluaiseadh*, including the aforementioned *Aonghas 'An Gighat'* Campbell and *Seonaidh Ruadh Dhòmhnagain* MacIntyre of Iochdar, South Uist.<sup>42</sup> Catriona has written down a good number of her father's tunes in a notebook, many of which may form a repertoire unique to Uist, providing an excellent source for further investigation concerning the *ceòl cluaiseadh* tradition of Uist. It should also be noted that upon listening to the recordings of Alex and Paddy Currie, she was able to recall several versions of *puirt-à-beul* related to tunes played on the recording.<sup>43</sup> Joe Peter MacLean of Boisdale, Cape Breton, was able to do a

similar exercise, providing local versions of *puirt-à-beul* from his and Alex's and Paddy's home district of Boisdale, Cape Breton.<sup>44</sup> These both help support Alex Currie's commentary that describes learning his music orally from his mother's Gaelic singing.

Although we have no surviving exponent of this dance piping today, the *seanchas*-based narratives employed here add to the legacy of vernacular ear-learned dance-piping in the Scottish and New World *Gàidhealtachds*. It should be noted that much of the music of these pipers survives in some of the present accordion and fiddle repertoires of South Uist and Cape Breton respectively. Joe Peter MacLean notes how this pipe music has been transferred into the realm of other instruments:

*Uill, na muinntir a bha 'seinn anns an t-seann dòigh mar sin, dìreach na Curries, Ailig Currie agus Pat Currie. Bhiodh iad a' seinn port air a' phìob mar gum bitheadh m'athair a' seinn air an fhìdheall, 's ma dh'fhaoidte gum bitheadh esan a' seinn air an fhìdheall mar a bha iadsan a' seinn air a' phìob. Co-dhiubh, bha esan a' faighinn port bhuaithe-san 's bho fheadhainn mar sin, mar gum bitheadh an t-seann dòigh a bha sin.*<sup>45</sup>

Well, the people that were playing in the old style were Alex and Paddy Currie. They would be playing tunes on the pipes as my father would be playing on the fiddle, and perhaps he would be playing on the fiddle as they were playing on the pipes. Anyway, he was getting tunes from him and from others like that, as was the old custom.

It is not only interesting to note the close relationship between the fiddle music of Joe Peter's father and the Currie brothers' piping, but also to note that they were transmitting tunes aurally between each other, in a method that appears to correlate with the methods of the *ceòl cluaiseadh* tradition of Uist. Joe Peter MacLean, being one of the last Gaelic-speaking musicians in Cape Breton, is invaluable in his ability to perceive his New World community's music from a Gaelic perspective. Having known Alex Currie personally and having grown up in a community with strong South Uist connections, Joe Peter understands the interrelationships between fiddle and pipe music and the Scottish Gaelic language, and how they have influenced and sustained each other and other forms of communal performance culture. Joe Peter is also capable of providing insight into literate versus oral/oral aesthetics in the transmission of fiddle music within his community, as noted in the following commentary concerning how his father and others learned the fiddle in MacAdam's Lake, Cape Breton:

*Ach co-dhiubh, bha seann phuirt aige. Sin mar a bha iad gan ionnsachadh—a' coimhead air a chèile 'dannsa 's a' seinn na fìdheall ma dh'fhaoidte 's a' togail. [...] Cha robh pàipear no sion aca riamh. Tha 'n t-seansa nach b'urrainn do mhòran a leubhadh co-dhiubh agus an tuigsinn aca—cha rachadh e 'staigh as a' cheann. Ach, chluinneadh iad òran aon turas bha e aca. Bha, tha sin ceart! An duine a thog an gothach bho phios de phàipear tha e gu math nas—tha cùram mòr air a' ghnothach a chumail ceart mar a tha e. Ach fear nach do thog e bhon a' phàipear tha e ga sheinn mar a chuala e e. Sin an diofar a th'ann. Uaireannan tha e gu math nas fheàrr na fear a dh'ionnsaich e bhon a' phàipear agus uaireannan eile chan eil. [...] Tha togail ann 's barrachd blas ann mar a thogadh mise e—cha robh duine a' leubhadh sion.*<sup>46</sup>

But anyway, he had old tunes. That's how they learned—looking at each other dancing and playing the fiddle perhaps and picking it up. They had no written music ever. I suppose that many of them couldn't read anyway and their comprehension was such that they couldn't absorb it. However, they would hear a song once and know it. Yes, that's right! A person who can pick up things from a piece of paper is much more—there is great care in keeping the thing correct as it is. But a person who doesn't pick it up from paper is playing it as he heard it. That's the difference. Sometimes it is much better than a person who learned it from the paper and others times it isn't. But there's lift in it and more of a certain quality to it as I picked it up—no one read a thing.

This narrative provides internal perceptions of the difference in aurally transmitted music, noting again that such qualities as *togail* or 'lift' and *blas*, literally meaning 'taste' or flavour but here referring to the quality of sound, in the music is achieved when one obtains music through *togail* or 'lifting' rather than learning it through formal literate means, sharing parallels with other *seanchas*-based narratives discussed here. Such commentaries reveal much about the changes that have occurred in musical performance over the last century and also document aesthetic similarities in the style of oral/aural dance piping extant in both Uist and Cape Breton.

It would be appropriate to close by discussing a specific feature that has made itself evident through repeated listening to the recordings of Alex and Paddy Currie, and that correlates nicely with Joe Peter MacLean's above narrative; that although there are limitations given through tempo, time signature and key signature of music, and the metre and stresses of the Gaelic language in the playing of *ceòl cluaiseadh*, or aurally transmitted dance music, what adds the distinctive nature to the music is an individual's performance of it upon obtaining the tune from his community. This has been revealed in the use of terms including *togail* or 'swing,' *blas* and *brigh* among the current generation of tradition-bearers. Having listened acutely to the recordings of Alex Currie and having spoken to those who knew him, one of the distinct features of his performance style was that he could never play the same tune the same way twice, constantly twisting it in a different direction each time but still rendering it recognizable. This is evident in melodic transcriptions of one of Alex and Paddy Currie's stock tunes, "*Am Muileann Dubh*," or as Alex used to also call it "The Black Snuff Mill," where subtle melodic variation can be noted within a single performance.<sup>47</sup> Another notable characteristic of these transcriptions is the note 'G' sitting somewhere between 'G' sharp and natural in all of the brothers' performances, sharing close parallels with the 'G' used in modern *ceòl mòr* performance and perhaps revealing an older aesthetic preference in the scale among musicians in Gaelic-speaking communities. It was chosen not to transcribe the ornamentation or grace-notes from the recordings because if variation occurred in the main melody of the tune it is obvious that the ornamentation would vary even more so.

"*Am Muileann Dubh*" is well placed to demonstrate these nuances. Being the most widely extant tune in the archival recordings of the Currie brothers' piping and a staple tune in both Cape Breton and South Uist dance-music repertoires allows for further melodic comparisons to be made in future research. This also makes it the best candidate for examining the nature and mechanics of this piping tradition, fitting into the concepts of thick corpus and organic variation as discussed by Lauri Honko, who suggests that:

By producing “thickness” of text and context through multiple documentation of expressions of folklore in their varying manifestations in performance within a “biologically” definable tradition bearer, community or environment has created a solid field of observation conducive to the understanding of prime “causes” or sources of variation, i.e. the mental processes of oral textualisation and construction of meaning. (17)

Although the melodic transcriptions and the above *seanchas* narratives employed in this article reveal a rather forensic approach to thick corpus and the discussion of vernacular dance-piping in Cape Breton and Uist, they are still capable of providing us with an impression of the nature of the tradition. Taking the evidence available into account, it should be noted that a certain degree of individual expression, perhaps even improvisation, within the said limits of a tradition is the missing ingredient in this ‘Gaelic’ style of pipe music. That is, the orally/aurally transmitted pipe tunes of the Uist and Cape Breton *Gàidhealtachd* behaved as vibrant ever-changing entities from one player or performance to the next until they were frozen on the staff of a music manuscript, the reel of a tape recorder, or the grooves of a gramophone record, as noted earlier by Kenneth Morrison of Griminis, North Uist. Those who played this music in an orally/aurally-transmitted style received it from the repositories or *stòras* of songs and tunes in their respective communities, maintaining it as a living idiom in its truest sense.

The appended melodic transcriptions from ear-learned pipers and the associated *seanchas* appearing in this article, and for that matter the archival recordings from which the transcriptions were made, cannot hope to convey the complex inner workings and associated aesthetics of vernacular dance piping, or *ceòl chuaiseadh* as it was referred to in Uist, yet they are capable of providing one with a glimpse into the nature of that tradition. In many ways the tradition in question fits the definition of immanent art as described by John Miles Foley pertaining to the performance of verbal art. The discussion of oral epics and their literary counterparts shares great similarities in the performance of music as revealed in the transcriptions of “*Am Muileann Dubh*” and the *seanchas*-based narratives discussed here, which reveal not only aspects of the inner mechanics but aesthetics of this style of piping, and its ability in “adhering to the idiom, on varying only within limits set by the natural flexibility of traditional structures. Properly managed by the poet [or piper] and properly received by his or her audience [...] these simple forms will bring forth enormous complexity by making present immanent associations that can never be captured in the textual net alone” (Foley 1991: 245). Therefore, it must be noted that these musicians, who filled dance halls in the Hebrides and Nova Scotia for generations, were practising, perhaps unknowingly, a living, vibrant and volatile art-form through an indigenous oral/aural idiom that was passed down to them from one generation to the next and defined by a given community’s understanding of the needs, meanings and functions associated with the music. The ebbing of this tradition is not solely affected with the passing of the Scottish Gaelic language or the changes in vernacular instrumental music and dance styles, but mainly in the loss of understanding the meaning, or *brìgh*, of how the various forms of cultural expression in the Gaelic cultural cosmos supported and sustained each other through intergenerational transmission at the communal level.



APPENDIX

“AM MUILEANN DUBH” (“THE BLACK SNUFF MILL”)  
TRANSCRIPTIONS:

**The Black Snuff Mill 01**

as played by Paddy Currie

The musical score for "The Black Snuff Mill 01" is presented in a single system of eight staves. The key signature is G major (one sharp, F#) and the time signature is 2/4. The piece starts with a two-measure rest, followed by a series of eighth and sixteenth notes. The notation includes various rhythmic values and accidentals, such as flats and naturals, indicating specific fingerings or ornaments. The piece concludes with a final cadence.

## The Black Snuff Mill 02

as played by Alex Currie

5

10

15

20

25

30

### The Black Snuff Mill 03

as played by Alex Currie

The musical score for 'The Black Snuff Mill 03' is presented in three staves of music. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is common time (C). The first staff begins with a treble clef and contains the first four measures of the piece. The second staff, starting with a measure number '5', contains measures 5 through 9. The third staff, starting with a measure number '10', contains measures 10 through 14. The music consists of a single melodic line with various rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests.

## The Black Snuff Mill 04

as played by Alex Currie (chanter)

The musical score is written on five staves in treble clef, with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a common time signature (C). The first staff begins with a whole note G4, followed by three rests. The second staff contains measures 2 through 5. The third staff contains measures 6 through 10. The fourth staff contains measures 11 through 15. The fifth staff contains measures 16 through 20, ending with a double bar line. The melody consists of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some accidentals (sharps and naturals).

## The Black Snuff Mill 05

as played by Alex Currie (chanter)

The musical score for 'The Black Snuff Mill 05' is presented in four staves. It is written in G major (two sharps) and 2/4 time. The melody is a single-line tune. The first staff contains the first four measures. The second staff, marked with a '5', contains measures 5 through 8. The third staff, marked with a '10', contains measures 9 through 12. The fourth staff, marked with a '15', contains measures 13 through 15, ending with a double bar line and repeat dots.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Portions of this article are based on research and fieldwork originally presented in the author's BA Honours thesis entitled, "*Brìgh 'Chiuil*: Aspects of the Vernacular Piping Traditions of Cape Breton and South Uist," conducted at the Department of Celtic Studies, St Francis Xavier University (2007) and in a paper entitled, "Remaining 'Gaelic' Elements Common in the Piping Traditions of Nova Scotia and the Hebrides," presented at the Twenty-Sixth Annual Harvard Celtic Colloquium (2006).

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<sup>2</sup> John Shaw's studies of Cape Breton tradition-bearers, *Sgeul gu Latha* (MacNeil 1987) and *Brìgh an Òrain* (MacLellan 2000), concerning the traditions of Joe Neil MacNeil and Lauchie Dan N. MacLellan, respectively, contain comprehensive passages of oral narrative from the tradition-bearers themselves, providing their own perceptions of various aspects pertaining to their tradition. More recently, Joshua Dickson in his volume based on his PhD research, *When Piping Was Strong*, employed narratives from a good number of South Uist tradition-bearers concerning their island's piping traditions. These works have both motivated and influenced much of the current author's research appearing here.

<sup>3</sup> A more detailed discussion on *seanchas* can be found in the current author's MSc Dissertation, "*A' Cur Seanchais gu Feum: An exploration in the various applications of seanchas-based discourse*" (Falzett 2008).

<sup>4</sup> See Figure 1 in Shaw 1992/1993: 39.

<sup>5</sup> Recorded in Sydney, Cape Breton on Friday, 6 October 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Along with the diversity of Scottish bagpiping traditions there is varied usage of the term 'traditional' in describing each of them. Here the term 'traditional' refers to vernacular piping traditions, often transmitted aurally, that were at one time the preferred accompaniment for communal dance in both the Old and New World Scottish *Gàidhealtachd*. John Gibson's *Traditional Gaelic Bagpiping: 1745-1945* and *Old and New World Highland Bagpiping* provide a comprehensive introduction to this piping tradition, although his definition and parameters of the tradition do not necessarily coincide directly with those of the author.

<sup>7</sup> On 23 March 2007, Joe Peter MacLean of Boisdale, Cape Breton answered a survey of one-hundred words taken from the isoglosses in Carl Borgstrøm's *The Dialects of the Outer Hebrides* (236-43) administered by the author and Professor Kenneth Nilsen of St F.X.U., Antigonish. His responses largely corresponded with the South Uist dialectal forms presented in Borgstrøm's isoglosses.

<sup>8</sup> John MacDonald of Glenaladale, *Fear a' Ghlinne*, organized the first major Highland emigration to what is today Canada, including thirty-six families from South Uist, settling Prince Edward Island in 1772 (Kennedy 183).

<sup>9</sup> Barry Shears lists eleven pipers from South Uist and Benbecula who emigrated to Nova Scotia between the years 1773 and 1848 in "Appendix A" of his volume *Dance*

*to the Piper: The Highland Bagpipe in Nova Scotia*, based on his MA dissertation (2008: 201-203).

<sup>10</sup> As noted from the following narrative, there is some discrepancy between accounts as to whether *Seonaidh Chaluim Ruaidh* emigrated from South Uist or was born in Cape Breton; here the author will consider Seonaidh to be of the first generation of his family born in Cape Breton. Joe Lawrence MacDonald, a tradition-bearer from Rear Beaver Cove, Cape Breton maintains that *Seonaidh* was an ear-learned Gaelic-speaking piper who accompanied step-dancing and he also places *Seonaidh's* death in the 1950s when he was near the age of 88, putting his birth in the vicinity of the 1860s (Gibson 2002: 212). Father Allan MacMillan in his genealogy *To the Hill of Boisdale* notes that *Seonaidh's* father, *Calum Ruadh*, emigrated from Frobost, South Uist at the age of twelve (497) and also notes *Seonaidh Chaluim Ruaidh* as the only one of his children without a noted year of birth (499). These notes from oral tradition along with *Seonaidh's* shortened *sloinneadh*, or patronymic, not going past his father, add to the question of his origins.

<sup>11</sup> Recorded by the author in North Side East Bay, Cape Breton on 1 March 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Step-dancing is a popular form of solo-dancing on Cape Breton, but is also practiced in the island's square dancing, where the dancer's steps rhythmically correspond to the tune and also quite often to the stressed vowels of the Gaelic language when a tune shares associations with the *puirt-à-beul* tradition of Gaelic vocal music. The author has found no firm evidence of step-dancing existing in the oral memory of South Uist tradition-bearers; however this is not to say that the tradition does not trace its origins to Scotland. For further discussion on step-dance in Scotland see the Fletts' volumes, *Traditional Dancing in Scotland* and *Traditional Step-Dancing in Scotland*.

<sup>13</sup> For a more complete analysis of the term *ceòl chluaiseadh* in South Uist see Chapter 11 of Dickson's *When Piping Was Strong* (207-35).

<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that the term *ceòl ceart*, literally 'correct music', among many contemporary South Uist tradition-bearers has an opposing connotation to its usage in Cape Breton, denoting a more literate and standardized form of piping, occasionally being employed through the term *piobaireachd cheart*. This also reveals the extent to which conventional Western ideals and aesthetics of correctness have gradually influenced the Scottish Gaelic worldview.

<sup>15</sup> Recorded by the author in St Ann's, Cape Breton on Friday, 15 September 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Recorded by the author in Huna, North Uist on 6 February 2008.

<sup>17</sup> The author is currently conducting more intensive fieldwork and research concerning the piping traditions of North Uist.

<sup>18</sup> Although the presence of tunes from literate piping repertoire can show the encroachment of standardized tradition on pipe music, it should also be noted that the fiddle tradition of Cape Breton has absorbed a good number a tunes from a literate

piping tradition into their own more aural dance idiom, including 2/4 marches. See Chapter 5, “The Influence of the Military Piping Tradition,” from “Cape Breton Fiddling and the Piping Connection,” unpublished B.A. thesis by Kimberley Fraser (40-5).

<sup>19</sup> William Ross held classes in Daliburgh, South Uist, in 1923 and 1924 and an anecdotal description of his last two evenings in Daliburgh are noted in the *Oban Times* (Dickson 129-131).

<sup>20</sup> From SA 1970.334.

<sup>21</sup> Neil MacMillan, styled *Niall Sheonaidh Nill*, of Gearraidh Bhailteas, South Uist noted that William Ross collected tunes from many of his ear-learned pupils in South Uist and put them to staff-notation:

**Neil MacMillan:** Willie Ross, *bha e 'cruinneachadh nam port a bha sineach ach bha e-shèin ga' sgrìobhadh* correct.

**Tiber Falzett:** *Chuir e iad a's na leabhraichean aige.*

**NMcM:** *Seadh, 's ann an Uibhist a thog e na puirt a bha sin. Bhiodh e 'cruinneachadh iad bhon a' chlas, a' togail nam port—puirt cluaiseadh. Bha e-shèin ga' sgrìobhadh ann a' staff notation.* (Recorded by the author in Milton, South Uist, 5 August 2006)

**Neil MacMillan:** Willie Ross, he was gathering those tunes but he himself was writing them correctly.

**Tiber Falzett:** He put them in his books.

**NMcM:** Yes, it was in Uist that he got those tunes. He would be gathering them from the class, picking up the tunes, the ear-tunes. He himself was writing them in staff-notation.

<sup>22</sup> From SA 1970.334.

<sup>23</sup> Donald Archie MacDonald's article “Some Aspects of Visual and Verbal Memory in Gaelic Storytelling” employs oral commentary from two Uist tradition-bearers, Donald Alasdair Johnson of South Uist and Angus MacMillan of North Uist, both of whom provide invaluable insight into the nature of various forms of memory in the transmission of Scottish Gaelic verbal arts.

<sup>24</sup> Lillis Ó Laoire, in his study on the transmission and nature of song on Tory Island, Donegal, entitled *On a Rock in the Middle of the Ocean*, discusses an under-examined Gaelic perception of cultural transmission in the Irish verbs, *tógáil* [lifting] versus *foghlaim* [learning], denoting informal and formal methods of cultural acquisition (59-65) and sharing similar parallels with the Scottish Gaelic verbal-nouns *a' togail* and *ag ionnsachadh*.

<sup>25</sup> Alex Currie's description of the methods by which his tunes were orally transmitted to him shares similarities with the *hardingfele* tradition of Norway, in that mothers were often the earliest sources of tuition for their sons through vocal imitations of the instruments (Hopkins 106).

<sup>26</sup> John MacLean of Cole Harbour recalled a MacKinnon piper from Uist having given them both tunes played on the chanter, noting:

They both were mentored by a Uist man, he was a MacKinnon and I think he must have come directly from the old country as a little boy. As a matter of fact Paddy and Alex, they used to call it *Uibhist*, but more often they said the Old Country. When you think of it in the 1970s they're still calling it the Old Country! [Laughter] But it was an old man, he was in his eighties and I think he might have come over as a child from Uist in the 1830s, because the only connection I can see was that he might have even been 90 in the 1920s. And he used to sit in the corner and blow the chanter for them so they learned a lot of tunes from him but also I think they learned most of their tunes from their mother's singing. But he was an Old-Country man as far as I knew. (Recorded by the author in Cole Harbour, Nova Scotia on 21 June 2006)

<sup>27</sup> See liner notes from Hamish Moore's album, *Dannsa' air an Drochaid: Stepping on the Bridge*.

<sup>28</sup> See the bibliography for a listing of Barry Shear's publications and MA thesis.

<sup>29</sup> See also Ronald Caplan's interview with Alex Currie in his anthology *Talking Cape Breton Music: Conversations with People who Love and Make the Music*, recorded in 1998 just several days before Alex passed away.

<sup>30</sup> See discography for a complete listing of recordings of Alex Currie available to the author and their various sources.

<sup>31</sup> Recorded by the author on the 2 May 2007 in Rear Christmas Island, Cape Breton.

<sup>32</sup> Recorded by the author in Daliburgh, South Uist on 3 July 2006.

<sup>33</sup> Recorded by the author in Stoneybridge, South Uist on 11 July 2006.

<sup>34</sup> Recorded by the author in Stoneybridge, South Uist on 11 July 2006.

<sup>35</sup> Recorded by the author in Stoneybridge, South Uist on 6 February 2008.

<sup>36</sup> Angus Campbell was an ear-learned piper of Iochdar, South Uist, who often played while seated working both of his feet. Peter 'an Gighat' Campbell, son of Angus, provided the author with the following narrative concerning his father's playing:

**Peter 'An Gighat' Caimbeul:** *Chum e an danns' a' dol fad na h-oidhcheadh.*

**Griogair Labhruidh:** *Agus bhiodh e 'cluich 's an uinneag, suas air a' sgeilp na shuidhe.*

**PC:** *Bhiodh e na shuidhe, sin mar a bha e ga cluichd co-dhiubh, 's ann.*

**Tiber Falzett:** *Agus am biodh e 'g obair a dhà chois nuair a bha e ga cluich?*

**PC:** *Bhitheadh, depending ge b'e dè danns' a bhiodh ann.*

**GL:** *A' cumail am beat.*

**PC:** *Dìreach, a' cumail beat, aidh, aidh. O bha e math airson dannsa, gun teagamh. Bhiodh e a' cluichd daonnan aig na bainnsean.*

**TF:** *Càit' an d'fhuair e na puirt a bh'aige?*

**PC:** *Bhiodh e 'cluinntinn iad bho sheadhainn eile, muinntir eile.*

**TF:** *Piobairean agus seinneadairean? Agus bha sibh ag ràdhainn gur e 'phiuthar na seinneadair. Dè an t-ainm a bh'oirre?*

**PC:** *Ceit NicNeacail.*

**Mrs. Peter Campbell:** *O 's e seinneadair gu math ainmeil a bh'ann an Ceit.*

**GL:** *An cluicheadh e cuideachd na puirt-à-beul?*

**PC:** *Chluicheadh. (Recorded by the author in Iochdar, South Uist on 1 August 2006)*

**Peter Campbell:** He kept the dance going all night.

**Griogair Labhruidh:** And he would be playing in the window, sitting up on the ledge?

**PC:** He would be sitting. That is how he would be playing it [the pipes] anyway, indeed.

**Tiber Falzett:** And would he be working his two feet when he would be playing it [the pipes]?

**PC:** Yes, depending on whatever dance it would be.

**GL:** Keeping the beat?

**PC:** Exactly, keeping the beat, aye, aye. Oh he was good at playing for dancing, without a doubt! He would always be playing at the weddings!

**TF:** Where did he get his tunes?

**PC:** He would be hearing them from some others, other folks.

**TF:** Pipers and singers? You were saying his sister was a singer. What was her name?

**PC:** Kate Nicholson

**Mrs. Peter Campbell:** Oh, Kate was quite a well-known singer.

**GL:** Would he [Angus 'an Gighat' Caimbeul] play *puirt-à-beul* also?

**PC:** Yes.

<sup>37</sup> This is a home video of Alex Currie playing in his home in Frenchvale, Cape Breton in the 1980s, a copy of which was provided to the author by the Currie Family.

<sup>38</sup> Recorded by the author in Milton, South Uist on 5 August 2006. Neil MacMillan's sentiments on the relationship between language and music are reiterated by Peter Jack MacLean, who noted the older generation of fiddlers relationship with the Gaelic language and its song tradition:

*Èisd ris na seann fhìdhlearan. Bha iad a' leantail air na h-òrain, caoin an òrain 's mar a chaidh an t-òran ga chur a chèile. Ach an-diugh thèid*

*agad air—seinnidh iad rud sam bith oirre ach chan eil... Tha mi 'dèanamh a-mach na seann fhidhlearan—bha Gàidhlig aca 's bha caoin nan òran aca 's bha iad gan cluinntinn. 'S bha siod nan cridhe 's bha e 'tighinn a-mach luachmhòr. [...] An aon rud a bh'aig na pìobairean. Bha siod dìreach 'tighinn o 'n cridhe. Bha iad a' cluinntinn na h-òrain 's bha iad a' cluinntinn na puirt a bha sin 's bha iad ga tharraing a chèile. (Recorded by author with James Watson in Rear Christmas Island, Cape Breton, July 2007)*

Listen to the old fiddlers. They were following the songs—the melody of the song and how the song was put together. But today they can—they'll play anything on it but it isn't... I perceive that the old fiddlers—they understood Gaelic and they knew the melodies of the songs and they were hearing them. And that was in their heart and it was coming out with conviction. The pipers were the same. That was just coming from their hearts. They were hearing those songs and tunes and they were pulling it together.

<sup>39</sup> Dwelly defines *brìgh* as, “Essence. 2 Substance. 3 Wealth. 4 Sap, juice, pith. 5 Elixir. 6 Vigour. 7 Strength, virtue. 8 Value. 9 Effect, avail, benefit. 10 Juice of meat. 11 Meaning, interpretation. 12 Energy” (2001: 123).

<sup>40</sup> Recorded by the author with James Watson in Rear Christmas Island, Cape Breton, July 2007.

<sup>41</sup> Recorded by the author in Uachdar, Benbecula on 13 July 2006.

<sup>42</sup> From interview recorded by the author in Uachdar, Benbecula on 13 July 2006.

<sup>43</sup> Catriona Garbutt's *puirt-à-beul* versions of some of the Currie tunes are available on an interview recorded by the author in Uachdar, Benbecula on 18 July 2006.

<sup>44</sup> Joe Peter MacLean provided several examples of *puirt-à-beul* from his father's and the Currie's repertoires in an interview recorded in St Ann's, Cape Breton on 15 September 2006.

<sup>45</sup> Recorded in St Ann's, Cape Breton on 15 September 2006.

<sup>46</sup> Recorded by author with James Watson in Iona, Cape Breton on 5 July 2007.

<sup>47</sup> See the appendix for the melodic transcriptions of “*Am Muilean Dubh*”/“The Black Snuff Mill” from the piping of Alex and Paddy Currie made by Kimberly Fraser and the author.



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