

THE GREAT IRISH WARPIPE

BY Garaidh O Briain

Information mainly based on a the following book: Flood, William H. Grattan, The Story of the Bagpipe. The Walter Scott Publishing Co., Ltd., 1911.



The skirl of the pipes: Either you love them or hate them, and few there be who are between. One needn't be of Celtic blood to enjoy the bagpipe (however, those who are Celtic do seem to have some genetic encoding that instills a love for the instrument); for the instrument has existed in every culture in one form or another throughout history.

Today the bagpipe is synonymous with Scotland, but the pipes really came from Ireland, where they are the forgotten instrument of the Emerald Isle. In 1911, William Grattan Flood, a professor of music at National University of Ireland, researched and printed The Story of the

Bagpipe. Professor Flood explored the instrument's early origin in the cradle of civilization, the Middle East, where he states the earliest date for the pipes is 4000 B.C., where a bagpipe is found in Chaldean sculptures. This evidence shows it is ancient, certainly as old as the harp and nearly as old as the drum. Greeks, Egyptians and Romans all marched to the skirl of the pipes to battle.

This antiquity includes the ancient Hebrews as well. Flood writes that the Bible passage of Genesis 4:21 has become mis-translated through various revisions over the centuries. The original German Bible of the 1500s used by the Lutheran Church at that time states that Jubal "was the father of fiddlers and pipers." The current translation in the King James Bible reads, "such as handle the harp and organ." The Hebrew word that is mis-translated is "Ugab." The word refers to a wind instrument such as a "pipe" or

"bagpipe," of which the German translation is "pfeife," Flood gives another example of mis-translation in Daniel 3:5, 10 & 15. The reference deals with Nebuchadnezzar's band, where the word "sumphonia" was translated to mean "dulcimer" instead of "bagpipe." Flood states that the word symphony actually referred to pipe music in the Middle Ages. The Hebrew word for dulcimer is "psandherin".



As for Ireland, a seventh-century account at the palace of Da Derg in Bohernabreena, County Dublin, lists people who came to pay homage to King Conaire the Great in 35 B.C., tells of nine pipers who came from the fairy hills of Bregia (County Meath), "the best pipe-players in the whole world," who are listed by name as Bind, Robind, Riabind, Sihe, Dibe, Deicrind, Umal, Cumal & Ciallgind.

The bagpipe was even given place in the Brehon Laws of the 400s. Here it is called the cuisle, meaning "the pulse," being a reference to the blood pulsing through one's veins. It's also in reference to the hum that comes from the drones.

At the great Feis' (parliament or festival) held at Tara, the pipers occupied a prominent position. The pipes (called a cuisleannoch) were one of the favoured instruments down to the last Feis that was presided over by King Dermot MacFergus in 560 A.D., there after Tara's Halls were silent.

After Christianity was embraced by the Irish, the bagpipe was used in church service to sustain the sacred chant or as a solo instrument. Depicted in one of the panels on the High Cross of Clonmacnois (dated about 910 a.d.) is a sculpture of a man playing a bagpipe standing on two cats.

It is clear that the bagpipe existed in Ireland long before Scotland. The bagpipe is believed to have made its way to Scotland with the Dalradians upon their exodus from County Antrim across the Irish Sea at about 470 A.D., when Prince Fergus MacErc lead his clan in the invasion of the lands of the Picts at present Argyle. The difference in the Scottish and Irish bagpipe is their name and the number of drones. The Scottish refer to their bagpipe as "the Great Highland Bagpipe," which today (an ancient bagpipe preserved from the battlefield of Culloden, 1746, has but a bass and a tenor drone) has

three drones: one bass and two tenor. The Irish call theirs "the Great Irish Warpipe," which has two drones: one bass and one tenor. In Gaelic the bagpipe is called "Piob Mor."

An observation of the Irish pipers was made by the musician Vincenzo Galilei in a published work titled Dialogue on Ancient and Modern Music in 1581 in Florence. Galilei wrote, "The bagpipe is much used by the Irish. To its sound this unconquered, fierce, and warlike people, march their armies and encourage one another to feats of valour. With it also, they accompany their dead to the grave, making such a mournful sounds as to invite - nay, almost force - the bystander to weep!"

This use of the bagpipe at funerals is mentioned at the funeral of Donnchadh, King of Ossory (father of Sadhbh or Isolde, Queen of Ireland in 975) in an ancient poem where nine keeners sung lamentations with an accompaniment of "cymbals and pipes harmoniously."

There were settlements made by many Irish bands in Wales who introduced the instrument. The Welsh readily accepted the strange instrument.

By the eleventh century the bagpipe slowly lost favour with the upper and middle class in favour of the harp. Yet in two deeds, one dated 1206 and the other in 1256, both near Dublin, mentioned Geoffrey the Piper and William the Piper.

Even though the upper class shunned the skirl of the pipes, its music could still be heard among the working class, especially the military who employed its emotional effects upon the battlefield. Unique to the Irish kerne (soldiers) was that the pipers actually lead their comrades into battle playing the warpipes, which Flood illustrates well in his use of the account by Standish O'Grady, who wrote about the Battle of the Curlews in County Sligo. This battle was fought on August 15, 1599, in which many English officers fell. O'Grady wrote, "Brave men, these pipers. The modern military band retires as its regiment goes into action. But the piper went on before his men, and piped them into the thick of battle. He advanced, sounding his battle-pibroch (song), and stood in the ranks of war while men fell around him.... So here upon the brown bog Red Hugh's pipers stood out beyond their men sounding wild and high the battle-pibrochs of the North with hearts and hands brave as any in the wild work.... At last the whole of the Queen's host was reduced to chaos, streaming madly away, and the battle of the Curlew Mountains was fought and lost and won." Thus, many State papers concerning various battles read: "Slew Art O'Connor and his piper." The entry shows that the loss of a

piper was most tragic, second to that of an important officer.

After the occupation of the Normans in 1169 of Ireland, the Irish were forced to enlist its men into regiments to assist the English Kings in their wars. To France marched the Irish regiment in 1243 for King Henry III, and into battle they advanced to the sounds of their warpipes; as they did at Gascony in 1286-1289 under King Edward I, and into Flanders in 1297. In the following year, the Irish army was assigned to the English army at the Battle of Falkirk in Scotland against Sir William Wallace, where on July 22, the Irish marched into battle line to the skirl of the warpipes as their cousins, the Scots, watched in amazement on the other side of the battlefield. It was at Falkirk that the Scotsmen saw the martial effect of the bagpipes upon the Irish soldiers and thereafter began bringing bagpipes into battle and into the annals of history.

The first mention of the Scots using their bagpipes in battle was at their victory at Bannockburn in 1314. The Irish army continued in Scotland, fighting their cousins from 1297-1334 under the command of the English.

Again as at Falkirk, Irish pipers marched 6,000 comrades into the Battle of Crecy in France, which was fought on August 26, 1346. This Irish army contributed heavily to the English victory over the French.

King Richard II delivered a silencing blow to the long tradition of the Irish warpipe playing the folk airs of the Emerald Isle or marching her troops into battle. The King recognized the warpipe's ability to rouse Irishmen to acts of "insurrection" and "violence." England caused for the Statute of Kilkenny to be passed in 1366 making the possession and playing of the warpipes a penal offense, which included having pipers entertain in the home. The English government became paranoid that Irish pipers acted as "...agents or spies on the English whereby great evils often resulted." The consequence of an infraction of the Kilkenny statute was death. No doubt the English were pleased with the results. The silencing of the warpipe in Ireland would not raise the Gaelic Clans anymore. This edict was again supported by Queen Elizabeth I and again by Cromwell, whose punishment was banishment to Barbadoes or other West Indies islands. Ironically, the English were delighted to have Irish regiments retain pipers outside of Ireland. Even in Ireland pipers still played, but by special order, like those given to Donal O'Moghan in 1375 and Richard Bennett in 1469. Both men, having proved their loyalty to the crown, were allowed to play their pipes.

Yet at the very time Ireland's pipers were silenced, the pipes were being listened to by

King Richard II, who had four pipers in his train in 1377, showing that the bagpipe was also popular in England.

During the 16th century the warpipes of the Irish kerne sounded throughout Europe. In May 1544, Lord Power marched his 800 Irish kerne in a warlike manner into London, and assembled them before the King in St. James' Park, with ten warpipers leading the way. These Irish kerne later served at Boulogne, where the Irish pipes skirled away during its siege in September.

Not only Londoners heard the Irish pipers, familiar ears along the Scottish Borders two years earlier heard the Irish airs. Those same airs were heard by the Scots again in 1549-1550, when the Irish kerne were part of Captain Sherlock's troops in King Edward VI's Scottish Expedition.

By the end of the 1500s, the Irish were again fighting in continental Europe, where Richard Stanihurst, who was at Antwerp in 1589, recorded his impression of the Irish pipers, writing, "The Irish also used instead of the trumpet a wooden pipe constructed with the most ingenious skill...This sort of instrument among the Irish is held to be a whetstone for martial courage; for just as other soldiers are stirred up by the sound of trumpets, so are they hotly stimulated by the noise of this affair." What Stanihurst didn't write is that the warpipe also served the purpose of the bugle in sounding battle commands. For example, in 1600 during the siege of Kinsale, Earl Tir Owen signaled retreat with his piper when he found himself outnumbered. Also at the Battle of Yellow Ford on August 14, 1598, the Earl of Tyrone, assisted by O'Donnell and Maguire, charged their Irish kerne to the skirl of the warpipes, utterly defeating Marshal Sir Henry Bagenal and his 4,500 troops. In 1647 with the surrendering of Ardlonan Castle, numbered among the garrison was a lone piper. During this same year Alastair MacColl MacDonnell found himself besieged in a northern castle. He embarked in a boat and placed a lone piper in another, which deluded his enemies who were trying to pursue



him.

Cromwell laid waste to Ireland in the mid - 1600s, and during this period various histories note the presence of warpipes . It was the last golden era of the instrument on the Emerald Isle.

Piper Cornelius O'Brien being a piper, was sentenced on January 25, 1656, "to receive twenty lashes on the bare back, on suspicion of inciting to rebellion."

He was deported to Barbados.

One hundred years after the events described by Stanihusrt, King James fought King William of Orange in the Siege of Derry in 1689 in northern

Ireland. Both kings had Irish pipers playing the troops into battle, which truly must have been awesome to see and hear. But the warpipes failed to rouse King James' troops to victory. King William banned all Irish minstrels, harpers and pipers.

Having been banned from Ireland once again, the warpipes found a home in France, where they led the Irish "Wild Geese" into war for the next hundred years. Their greatest moment in France was at the Battle of Fontenoy in 1745. As was the custom of the Irish kerne, the pipers led their comrades onto the battlefield. Knowing that the Royal Scots regiments of the 21st, 25th and 42nd (Black Watch) were assembling on the other side, the warpipers struck into the great Jacobite song "The White Cockade." It must have rankled the kilts of the Scots to no end in hearing played the famous Scottish Jacobite rebel song. At Fontenoy, the French and their "Wild Geese" were victorious.

A few months later was the Scottish Jacobite Rebellion, ending at Culloden. Prince Charles Stewart asked France for some of the Irish kerne to assist. The liaison between Stewart and France was Colonel O'Brien, of Clare's Regiment. France assisted the Scots with Irish troops, but the English captured the ships with most of the troops. The few who got through died on the battlefield or were captured and returned to France.

While the warpipe was alive and well upon the battlefields of France, the warpipe had almost disappeared in Ireland. Queen Elizabeth and Cromwell succeeded in abolishing

the warpipe. But the ingenious pipers invented another pipe to take its place. The uilleann pipe required the joining of a bellows under the right arm, which pumped air via a tube to the bagpipe under the left arm, with the bellows replacing the blowpipe. The instrument could only be played sitting down and had a much lighter sound, making it a popular instrument for the parlour. The English placed no ban upon this new pipe, and by 1710 the warpipe was gone and the uilleann pipe was established. (Today the uilleann pipe is the national instrument of Ireland.) Except for the battlefield and funeral marches, the warpipe of Ireland was silent.

The bagpipe began to make a re-appearance in Ireland around the turn of the century. This was heavily influenced by Irishmen who had served in the British army. Pipe Bands appeared on the scene as they did in Northern Ireland and in Scotland. It would be true to say that today in Ireland the pipe band scene is heavily influenced by the Ulster Scot and Scottish heritage but recent years have seen quite a re-discovery of Irish traditional music as part of the normal pipe band repertoire. Much of this has been influenced by the publication of Irish music by such people as Dave Rickard and Terry Tully in this generation and by Kennedy, Cleary, Glen, etc. in a previous generation. Irish jigs and reels are commonly played by bands throughout the world with bands such as the 78th Frasers in the vanguard of this development. A live concert given by the St. Laurence O'Toole Pipe Band in Kilkenny was a milestone event in that it firmly rooted that band's repertoire in the Irish tradition and was a unique blend of Irish traditional instruments with bagpipes and drums. Hopefully this concert will be repeated and recorded.