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# Patriarchs, Pipers and Presidents: Gaelic Immigrant Funerary Customs and Music in North America

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**Abstract:** One of the most moving tributes to the dead is the playing of the Highland bagpipes during funeral services, whether in the church or at the graveside. This custom has a long history both in Scotland and in areas of North America settled by Scottish immigrants over the past 300 years, and for lovers of bagpipe music it is an essential part of the funeral ritual. Throughout its history the piper's lament has transcended social class structure and has been performed for paupers and presidents alike. Despite being deeply rooted in tradition, the music and function of this musical practice have changed over time. Drawing from printed texts of the 19th and 20th centuries, recent scholarship and local folklore surrounding funeral customs and music, this paper examines the origins of the funeral piping tradition in Gaelic Scotland and its evolution in North American society.

**Keywords:** bagpipe; music; piper; funeral; laments; Amazing Grace; keening; Scotland; Cape Breton; Prince Edward Island; Nova Scotia

## 1. Introduction

One of the most enduring customs of Scottish Gaels in North America is the playing of music on the bagpipes at funerals. This centuries-old custom has spread throughout mainstream culture so much so that it is no longer considered a purely Scottish ritual. Pipers today are asked to perform at weddings and funerals more often than any other singular event, although an informal survey shows that 75 percent of the funerals requesting a piper are for men.<sup>1</sup> During Remembrance Day ceremonies across Canada on November 11, a piper often plays a lament after the two-minute silence for those who gave their lives in war. This tradition is not restricted to Canada. In the United States, pipers played at the funerals of Presidents John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford.<sup>2</sup> Graveside tunes for these men included “The Mist Covered Mountains” (*Chì Mi na Mòrbheanna*) for Kennedy ([The Black Watch 1966](#)) and “Amazing Grace” for Reagan ([Wake and District 2009](#)) and Ford ([Chartsfo 2007](#)).

What began as an oral tradition of the bardic class, sometimes involving harp music and the singing of funeral dirges by professional female singers, gave way to musical lamentations performed on the bagpipes. Death, of course, is a natural part of life, but there is a paucity of anecdotal descriptions of funeral music and customs from the 18th century. To fill this void, I have selected material from published obituaries, as well as both historical observations and local folklore from the 19th and early 20th centuries to provide an intimate, if only partial, look at these customs in both Scotland and

<sup>1</sup> This informal survey was conducted recently on the Dunsire Forums, a chat group for pipers around the world. The half a dozen or so pipers from North America, who responded to my question about piping at funerals, suggested that pipers were featured more frequently at male than female funerals. The split was roughly 75 to 25, showing a decided male bias towards this tradition. My correspondents were at a loss to explain why this was the case.

<sup>2</sup> Videos of all three funerals can be found on YouTube, as well the funeral service for Sir Winston Churchill ([The Havengore Trust 2013](#)), where bagpipes were also played.

parts of the Gaelic diaspora in North America. One thing is certain: music performed at funerals has changed over time to reflect local aesthetics and musical tastes. This paper will examine the evolution of this aspect of funeral ritual and the type of music performed in both Gaelic Scotland and scattered Highland communities in North America.

## 2. Literature Review

There is, as yet, no published work dealing exclusively with the various aspects of funerary customs among Scottish Gaels in North America, such as sung laments known as *Corronach*, laments played on the Highland bagpipe, or associated customs surrounding wakes and funerals. These topics are given passing mention in Scottish sources such as the *Old and New Statistical Accounts* and a handful of books published in the 19th and 20th centuries. Both the *Old and New Statistical Accounts* (1791–1799 and 1834–1845, respectively) were compiled to provide contemporary records of social life, local commerce, fisheries, agriculture and demographics in many parts of Scotland. The data were often collected by members of the clergy. The published reports are not a precise account of life in the Scottish countryside due to their brevity, but they include occasional references to the playing of bagpipes for both social dancing and funerals. As a resource, they are useful since they cover the periods of extensive emigration from Scotland to North America.

The early 19th century witnessed an increased interest in the customs and traditions of the Scottish Gael. James Logan authored *The Scottish Gaël; or, Celtic Manners, as Preserved among the Highlanders*, which included a small section of funerary customs and burial rituals (Logan 1847). Later, he provided historical notes to R.R. McLan's *The Clans of the Scottish Highlands* (McLan and Logan 1845) and Angus MacKay's *A Collection of Ancient Piobaireachd or Highland Pipe Music* (MacKay 1838).

In the early 20th century, William Gratton Flood's *The Story of the Bagpipe* provided a very romantic view of the evolution of bagpipe music from Biblical times and, while much of the book is more fancy than fact, it does include occasional references to laments played on the bagpipe (Flood 1911). Francis Collinson's investigation into the evolution of traditional music, *The Traditional and National Music of Scotland*, offers detailed analysis of all forms of traditional music, including both sung and played laments (Collinson 1966). Roderick Cannon's *The Highland Bagpipe and its Music* and Joshua Dickson's *When Piping was Strong* also touch on funeral music (Cannon 1995; Dickson 2006). Sources dealing with funeral music among Scottish immigrants and their descendants in North America are scarce and scattered.

John G. Gibson's seminal works, *Traditional Gaelic Piping 1745–1945* and *Old and New World Highland Piping*, detail many individual pipers and their role in society as purveyors of dance music in both Scotland and Nova Scotia (Gibson 1998; Gibson 2002). They also include several references to funeral piping in rural Cape Breton in the late 19th century. My own books, *The Gathering of the Clans Collection* (vol. 1), *Dance to the Piper: The Highland Bagpipe in Nova Scotia*, and *Play It Like You Sing It: The Shears Collection of Bagpipe Culture and Dance Music from Nova Scotia* (vols 1 and 2), provide additional information on funeral customs and several examples of funeral music (Shears 1991; Shears 2008; Shears 2018). Local folklore dealing with end-of-life events and accompanying music have expanded our knowledge of funerary customs in Gaelic society, and a sampling of 19th- and 20th-century obituaries has also proved valuable, as these describe in detail the musical requirements of these solemn events.

## 3. Discussion of Evidence and Analysis of Sources

Chanting or singing at funerals seems to have been a universal custom. A natural progression of chanting was the composition of songs designed specifically to accompany this ritual. These songs, either sung or accompanied by a musical instrument, were expressions of sorrow known as the *Corronach*. The development of this genre of music originally fell to the bards, who were the chroniclers of family history in Highland society. The influence of the bardic tradition on this form of funeral music has been described by James Logan.

James Logan was born in the 1790s in Aberdeen, Scotland, and for a time lived in London, spending long hours at the British Museum. He was a piper, and in 1826 he travelled to the north of Scotland to collect material for his book on the customs and traditions of the Gael. In 1831, Logan's *The Scottish Gaël* was published in two volumes in London (Donaldson 2000, pp. 152–155). His writings have come under criticism in recent years, leading to questions about the veracity of his works.<sup>3</sup> In *The Scottish Gaël*, Logan devotes twelve pages to describing various aspects of funeral rites, including modes of interment, wakes and funerals, and music both sung and played (Logan 1847, pp. 477–489). He writes:

The Celts . . . were so partial to music, thought it indispensable on occasion of death. The bards always attended at the raising of the tomb, besides singing the praises of the dead in the circles, and the poem or rather both it and the music, was called the coronach [*Corronach*]. (ibid., p. 487)

The *Corronach* was often set to music and espoused in verse the virtues of the deceased, their accomplishments in life, and sometimes their genealogy. In Scotland, women were occasionally employed as professional singers, similar to the practice of keening in Ireland (ibid., p. 486). Collinson, a well-known Scottish musicologist, notes that women played an integral role in the performance of funeral verse:

On the occasion of a death in a Gaelic household, it was the custom up to about a hundred to a hundred and fifty years ago (and in isolated cases, much more recently), to sing the virtues and mourn the loss of the person who had died, to a special kind of music. This was usually sung by a professional mourning woman, the *bean-tuiream* (plural, *Mnathan-tuirim*). It was a ritual which was looked upon as the proper right and need of everyone, high or low, to ensure their happy passage to the next world, the *bàs-sona*, or 'happy death'. (Collinson 1966, p. 113)

Collinson also observes that every community had a mourning woman, equal in importance to the midwife. These women handled the beginning and end of people's lives in the community; the 'hatching and dispatching', as a local Newfoundland saying goes. Collinson quotes Alexander Carmichael's account that there were two distinct types of mourning songs used by these women. One was sung in the house and the other was reserved for the funeral procession to the graveyard (ibid.).

For pipers, a suitable lament played outside, or occasionally in the church and at the graveside, is usually the custom. The late Alex Currie (1910–1997), a mostly ear-learned piper, told me that when he was growing up in MacAdam's Lake, Cape Breton, it was considered bad luck to play a lament in the house. How widespread this belief was in the Gaelic communities of North America is unknown, and it may have varied from community to community. Neil MacNeil describes the visit of Black Dan the Clock-Maker to his grandfather's home in Washabuck, Cape Breton, and the ensuing selection of pipe tunes that were always played during these visits (MacNeil 1971, p. 154). The identity of Black Dan has yet to be discovered, but he was described as a talented piper by MacNeil, and on this particular occasion the last tune of the piper's concert was "MacCrumen's Lament [*sic*]", a melody often associated with funerals (Blankenhorn 1978, pp. 45–47; Shears 2018, pp. 253–54). The playing of laments could be used at funerals to honour the dead but, as in the case of Washabuck, could also be played to reflect nostalgia for the old country. Perhaps for immigrant Gaels and their descendants in Nova Scotia, laments may have also symbolized the death of the old life in Scotland.

Today, there are generally two classes of bagpipe music, *ceòl mór* and *ceòl beag* (Collinson 1966, p. 174). *Cèol mór* ("great music"), or pibroch (from Gaelic *piobaireachd*), is considered the "classical" music of the Highland bagpipe. Pibroch has been further divided into Laments (*Cumha*), Salutes (*Fàilte*), Battle tunes, Gathering tunes and descriptive tunes such as *The Desperate Battle of the*

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that I have observed some aspects of Logan's description of piping in the early 19th century still being practiced among the ear-trained pipers in Cape Breton and Newfoundland until the late 20th century.

*Birds and The Bells of Perth*. Many individuals had commemorative tunes composed for them and, out of the 264 tunes published by the Piobaireachd Society (books 1–16) ([The Piobaireachd Society 1925–2015](#)), 72 pieces of music are identified as Laments.

*Ceòl beag* (“little music”) encompasses all other forms of pipe music, including slow airs, marches, and dance music. A few of the “lighter” tunes such as lullabies, sung laments and military slow marches have sometimes been referred to as *ceòl meadhonach* (meaning middle or medium music), but this term is seldom used by pipers today ([Collinson 1966](#), p. 174). Even though early accounts refer to the music being played on the pipes as *piobaireachd*, it is doubtful they were all examples of what we know now as *ceòl mór*. In the early 19th century, all pipe music was called pibroch (or its various spellings), since the Gaelic terms *ceòl mór* and *ceòl beag* appear to date only from the late 19th century ([Cannon 1995](#), p. 46).

In the 17th and 18th centuries, Highland chiefs were patrons of the arts, and they often employed pipers full time on their estates. During this time, the bardic and piping traditions were more closely aligned, and a few of the early pipers in Scotland were also bards. These included Iain Dall “Blind John” MacKay (c. 1656–1754); John MacGillivray (1774–1862), piper and bard to MacDonald of Glenaladale (who immigrated to Antigonish County, Nova Scotia, in 1818); and possibly Patrick Mór MacCrimmon (c. 1640–1670) ([Collinson 1966](#), p. 63). It has also been suggested that some of the earliest examples of pibroch may have been tunes (i.e., song melodies) re-arranged to suit the medium and structure of *ceòl mór* ([MacDonald 1995](#)).<sup>4</sup> Certainly, language and instrumental music were more closely related until Gaelic’s steep decline. It has been noted that several 18th-century bards used pibroch melodies for their songs. Rob Donn MacKay (1714–1788) composed the song “Isabel MacKay” using the melody of the pibroch, “The Prince’s Salute”. Duncan Bàn MacIntyre (1724–1812) employed a similar style, imitative of a pibroch structure, for his “In Praise of Beinn Dorain” (Moladh Beinn-Dorain) ([Collinson](#), p. 196). In addition, Alexander MacDonald (Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair c. 1690–1770) also adopted this format for his “Moladh Moraig” ([Mackenzie and Logan 1841](#), pp. 106–8). Over the past few decades, professional pipers such as Allan MacDonald from Glenuig, Scotland, have been reuniting instrumental interpretations of pibroch with their Gaelic song counterparts.

At some point, the singing of the *Corronach* was replaced by the playing of the bagpipe, although for some time both were used ([Logan](#), p. 488). Logan remarked that “the bagpipe was well adapted to produce the wailing notes, accordingly with the solemnity of the occasion” (*ibid.*). Gradually, the bagpipe displaced the harp as a favoured court instrument in the 18th century, as harp-playing died out ([Cannon 1995](#), p. 52). Grace Campbell cites two Scottish references to funeral piping in the 17th and 18th centuries. One in 1669 was the funeral of Fraser of Foyers, “whose body was conveyed across Loch Ness, with many Grants, Cummings, and Frasers . . . In four great boats, trumpets sounding, pipers playing, echoes rebounding” ([Campbell 1964](#), p. 139). Almost fifty years later, the burial of Campbell of Lochnell in 1714 was attended by several thousand men, including Rob Roy MacGregor and “the screams of thirteen bagpipes” (*ibid.*, p. 64).

Piping at funerals was common in the Western Isles of Scotland, as Reverend Finlay McRae, North Uist, noted in his 1837 contribution to *The New Statistical Account of Scotland*:

At funeral processions, which had been, and still are conducted with remarkable regularity, the pipes, in strains of pathos and melody, followed the bier, playing slow plaintive dirges, composed for and used only on such occasions. On arriving near the church-yard, the music ceased, and the procession formed a line on each side, between which the corpse was carried to its narrow abode. ([McRae 1845](#), vol. 14, p. 172)

<sup>4</sup> For further discussion on the subject of pibroch song, see Allan MacDonald’s unpublished MLitt thesis, “The Relationship between Pibroch and Gaelic Songs: Its Implications on the Performance Style of the Pibroch Ùrlar”, Edinburgh University, 1995. <https://www.cl.cam.ac.uk/~rja14/musicfiles/manuscripts/allanmacdonald/>.

The tradition of playing the *Corronach* on the bagpipe was brought to North America with the Highland immigrants. One of the earliest mentions of its performance can be found in the obituary for Donald Beaton in Prince Edward Island (PEI) in 1841 (McDonell 2019). Donald was the patriarch of several generations of Beatons in PEI, and his death at age ninety-five included a send-off in what was known in some districts as the old “Highland” style:

Died, February 22d, at his residence, at East Point, justly regretted, MR DONALD BEATON, sen., at the patriarchal age of 95 years. He was born 20 July 1746, in the Village of *Achlauchrach*, in the Parish of *Cappach, Lockaber*, and emigrated to this Island shortly after its conquest by the British, and was one of its first settlers. By untiring industry, he brought up a large and respectable family; and had the happiness, before his decease, to behold his progeny increase to the third and fourth generation. His remains were conveyed from his late residence to the Cemetery of St Columbus, followed by a numerous and respected assemblage of relatives and friends; and, according to his strict injunctions to his surviving friends, his funeral was attended to the grave by the *National airs of his native glens!* The solemn *Piobrachd* as it died away in the distance, reminded us of the “*deeds of the times of old*”, when the Chieftain’s corpse was followed by the weeping clan, and the mournful *Coronach* [*sic*] of the Highland pipes reverberated from the neighbouring hills! REQUIESCATA IN PACE! (*Colonial Herald and Prince Edward Island Advertiser* 1841, pp. 2–3)<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, there is no mention of the pipe music performed on that day.

What types of music were played at funerals in areas settled by Scottish Gaels? We are fortunate that someone took the time to name the actual pieces of music performed at Angus Og Cameron’s funeral procession in Mabou, Cape Breton in 1899 (Rankin 2019). Angus Cameron was characterized as “Mabou’s eldest son” when he passed away on 6 June 1899, at age ninety-two. A prominent figure in Mabou, he was described as being tall, with a stalwart form, “his clean shaven face, venerable gray hairs, black beaver-hat and stout staff constituted an impressive and commanding figure”. He and his wife, who pre-deceased him by seven years, raised a large family of eight boys and four girls, and many of his descendants, including the members of the Rankin Family Band, remained in the Mabou area for many years.

His obituary goes on to describe the solemn procession in detail:

A thorough believer in everything Highland, his dearest delight, second only to matters of religion, was to hear and talk of the clans and their deeds in “*auld lang syne*.” He had himself all the virtues characteristic of them; a great contempt of falsehood and meanness. Rugged honesty and sterling integrity marked him. It need not, therefore, surprise anyone that his friends—and above all his own sons—should have carried out his funeral in harmony with his own old-time notions, in a word that his should be in the time-honored Highland style which honored the worthy departed by the pibroch and bearing the remains on the shoulders. Thus, then, were the deceased’s remains tenderly and respectfully borne to their last resting place by the men of Mabou—some, indeed, of whom, it was noted had already passed their three score and ten. Yes, slowly, orderly, and solemnly one of the largest funeral corteges for many years seen in Mabou thus wended its way, timed to the wail of McCrimmons’ [*sic*] lament, Lochaber, Flowers of the Forest, McGregor’s, and Mac ic Raonial na Caepeach. After a Requiem High Mass by Rev. John McMaster, P.P., all that was mortal of good old *Aonas Og* was buried with the blessing of the Church whose Sacraments had prepared him to meet his Lord and his God. May his soul rest in peace! (*The Casket* 1899, p. 5)<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> This information was kindly sent to me by Angela McDonell, Wellington, Prince Edward Island.

<sup>6</sup> This newspaper reference was kindly sent to me by Effie Rankin, Mabou, Cape Breton.

We can see that the written obituary began to replace the praise poem of the bard among the local populace. Gaelic laments were still composed in 19th- and 20th-century Nova Scotia but, with a shrinking Gaelic-speaking population, this practice declined over time. The above obituary exhibits some of the same information a funeral poem would have contained, but it is much less colourful and much shorter. Longevity of life, genealogy, and personal qualities and achievements were all topics one would expect to be included in a sung lament. The practice of carrying the corpse on the shoulders of the pall-bearers to the grave and the accompanying pipe music were also referred to in Cape Breton as the “old Highland” style (MacDonald 1968, pp. 29–30).

We are left to wonder who wrote this tribute for Angus Og Cameron or the name of the piper, or pipers, who played at his funeral. The intimate knowledge of tune names was most likely not a widespread skill at the time, so the source was probably a piper. This information may have been supplied by Rev. John MacMaster, himself a piper, or his good friend and fellow piper, “Black” Angus MacDonald (1849–1939), from nearby Mount Young. Black Angus was one of the most popular pipers in the district, so it may have been he who played for the funeral. Another possibility may have been Archie A. Beaton, a noted piper from the Mabou Coal Mines and cousin of Angus Og’s late wife. The list of funeral dirges mentioned in this obituary is interesting. It contains the names of both well-known and obscure melodies, all of which are very old.

The first tune, “McCrimmon’s Lament”, exists in both the *ceòl mór* and *ceòl beag* traditions. In this instance, it was most likely a piece of *ceòl beag* or an example of what was once known as a pibroch song. Research shows multiple regional variations of this piece of music in both Scotland and Nova Scotia (Blankenhorn 1978; Shears 2018, vol. 2, pp. 253–56).

The second tune, “Lochaber” is probably “Lochaber No More”. Allan Ramsay wrote the words “Farewell to Lochaber and Farewell to my Jean” to an existing melody in 1724. The melody used was titled “King James March to Dublin”, which occurs in the Atkinson Manuscript of 1694. The melody has been attributed to the Irish harper and later immigrant to Scotland, Thomas Connellan, and variations of the tune also appear under many other titles, including “Limerick’s Lamentation”, “Sarsfield’s Lamentation”, and “Reeves Maggot” (Sanger 2019). Pipe Major G.S. MacLennan (1883–1929), a renowned early 20th-century piper, played this lament at the funeral of Scottish violinist and composer James Scott Skinner in 1927.

An arrangement of “Lochaber No More” appears in a pre-First World War handwritten manuscript (MS) belonging to the late Captain Angus J. MacNeil (1856–1918) (MacNeil 1987). MacNeil was an officer piper in the 94th Regiment, Victoria Battalion, who died from Spanish Influenza in 1918. His manuscript includes not only this lament but also several examples of dance music from the Iona-Washabuck area of Cape Breton (Shears 2018, vol. 2, pp. 9–79). MacNeil most likely learned to play the bagpipe from his maternal grandfather, Roderick Maclean, and some of the music contained in his MS may reflect part of the repertory of this Scottish-born musician.

Roderick MacLean came to Washabuck with his father, Lachlann, and brother, Peter, who was also a piper, from the island of Barra in 1817. After Peter’s death from drowning in 1827, Roderick became the family piper (Gibson 2002, p. 215). Roderick played a dirge at the funerals of his father Lachlann, brother Neil, a sister, and three of his grandsons. Piping eventually died out in Washabuck, and during memorial services at the local cemetery in 1934, 1990 and 2005, pipers had to be brought in to play a suitable lament in memory of the Scottish pioneers who settled in the area (ibid., p. 217; MacLean 2014, p. 110).

The third tune mentioned, “The Flowers of the Forest”, commemorates the Battle of Flodden in 1513, where the English defeated the Scottish army of James IV and where the Scots lost an estimated 10,000 men. The “forest” in the tune title included parts of Selkirkshire, Peebleshire and Clydesdale, whose population of males of military age was almost entirely wiped out (Sanger, 2 December 2019). The melody has a long history in Scotland. Keith Sanger, a Scottish researcher and musician, discovered that:

[t]he tune goes back at least as far as the early 17th C as it occurs in the Skene Mandora MS dated to circa 1615–1625, so feasibly could extend back to the event itself in 1513. It also features, not as a lament but as a reel in the Gillespie MS, (1768) and with added variations in Oswald’s Caledonian Pocket Companion. (ibid.)

Today, “The Flowers of the Forest” is usually played for the funerals of veterans, firefighters, and policemen and women, as well as during Remembrance Day services in Canada on November 11. The tune also had currency in Cape Breton. It is said that at Malcolm Gillis’ funeral in 1929, his close friend and fellow musician, Allan MacFarlane, played “The Flowers of the Forest” on his bagpipe continuously during the four-mile walk to the cemetery (MacDougall 2004, p. 198). Malcolm Gillis was a famous bard and multi-instrumentalist from South West Margaree, Cape Breton, and Allan MacFarlane was both a piper and fiddler from the same district.

There are two published laments (*ceòl beag*) associated with the Clan MacGregor published in 19th-century collections of pipe music, and it is a pity that we do not have more information about the one identified in Angus Og’s obituary. One of the laments, “MacGregor of Ruara” (*MacGriogra o Ruadhshruth*), may be a possibility, and there are Gaelic words associated with this tune, so it may even have been sung as well (Figure 1) (McEwan-Fujita 2020).

*Tha mulad, tha mulad, Tha mulad gam lìonadh* (Seanair 1994, p. 37)

(Sorrow is, sorrow is, sorrow is filling me)<sup>7</sup>

The last tune mentioned is “Mac ‘ic Raghnaill na Ceapaic”, and the identity of this melody has proved elusive. Inquiries in Scotland and Nova Scotia regarding the history or melody of this tune title have so far been unsuccessful. The tune’s name indicates a Keppoch or Lochaber connection, so it was probably a local tune from the Mabou area. It may have been brought over with immigrants from the Scottish mainland and eventually lost, or it may be known by another name today. Perhaps more information will surface at some point in the future.

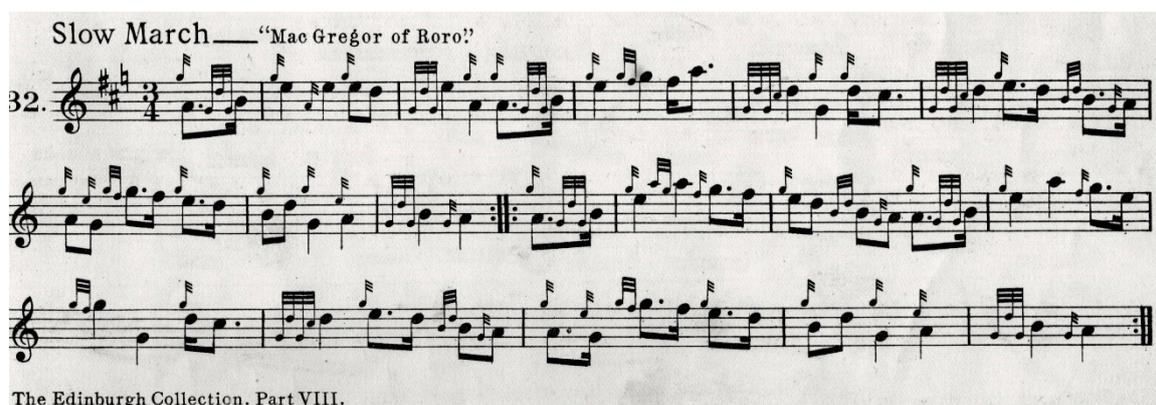


Figure 1. Pipe music by MacGregor of Roro.

Local folklore provides historians with important details about funeral music. The following example comes from the small village of Port Hood, Inverness County, Nova Scotia. There occurred in this community the death of a man who was not well liked, but he was especially despised by the local piper and fiddler, Ranald ‘Màiri Bhàin’ Beaton (1859–1960). According to local tradition, when the man died,

<sup>7</sup> Translation modified by Emily McEwan-Fujita, personal communication with author, 21 January 2020.

His family wanted an old-style Scotch funeral with six men actually carrying the corpse behind a piper. In spite of knowing of Ranald's aversion to [the man], they still approached him to lead the cortege and were very surprised when they found that he was willing to play for his old adversary. On the way to the graveyard Ranald played the evocative slow air "Fuadach nan Gaidheal". (The Exile of the Highlanders/Lord Lovat's Lament)

All went well and, after the funeral, someone asked Ranald what was the beautiful lively tune that he had played on the way back from the graveyard. Ranald replied in Gaelic that it was "Cuir do Shròin an Tòin a' Choin Dubh". (Put Your Nose in the Black Dog's Arse) (Gillis 2008)

Ranald was not only known for his musical skill but also for his cutting wit. He was not satisfied to participate in the communal ritual of a funeral without missing the opportunity to express through music his continued resentment for the deceased. The lament performed on that day was "Lord Lovat's Lament", and in parts of Nova Scotia, this tune was used instead of "The Flowers of the Forest" (Creighton and MacLeod 1964, p. 60).

The presence of pipe music at a funeral was never more pronounced than on the death of a piper. It was said that when William MacKenzie, piper of Centreville, Pictou County, died, his funeral was attended by a hundred pipers. Despite the inflated claims of this bit of folklore, pipers were certainly supportive when one of their own was laid to rest. An account of the outpouring of grief and respect was sometimes included as part of the funeral notice, as was the case with Angus MacMillan Fraser:

Angus MacMillan Fraser, widely known bagpiper, who died on Sunday at the age of 64, was buried yesterday in Mount Olivet Cemetery in Maspeth, as his band of pipers played the Children's Lament. More than 400 were present at the burial, including representatives of the Clans MacDonald, Chisholm and MacKenzie. Services at the grave were conducted by Fred Taggart, past chieftain of the Caledonian Club, of which Mr. Fraser was first chieftain. The pipers, known as Angus Fraser's Lovat Pipe Band, which consisted of twenty-five pieces, played four numbers during the services. (New York Times 1938, p 17)

The *New York Herald Tribune* reported that the New York City Scots sent Fraser off with "the biggest funeral parade ever to be seen in the city of New York and continued for a full six city blocks" (New York Herald Tribune 1938). A fellow competitor and friend, John Sabiston, played "Lament for the Children" as Fraser's coffin was lowered into the ground. This was a fitting tribute to a man who, according to the *Tribune*, was instrumental in the establishment of piping and dancing in the eastern United States, especially in the New York area (Shears 2008, p. 124).

Angus MacMillan Fraser was one of ten children born to Alexander Fraser and Catherine Morrison (Figure 2). Fraser's parents emigrated from Inverness, Scotland, sometime before 1858, and the first three of their ten children were born in Ontario. The family later relocated to Lost River, Quebec, Canada, where Angus was born on 27 June 1873. Fraser was a Highland dancer and piper who competed successfully in both North America and Scotland. Fraser's first language was Gaelic, but he also spoke English and French. As a competitor at the various Highland games, he won many prizes for both piping and dancing. In 1906 and 1911, while visiting Scotland, he won a prize for being the best dressed Highlander. When the *Queen Mary* arrived in New York Harbor on her maiden voyage during the summer of 1936, Angus Fraser was the Pipe Major in charge of the massed bands engaged to provide a Scottish welcome to the Clyde-built ship.



**Figure 2.** Angus MacMillan Fraser (1873–1938).

Angus Fraser was also well connected with several societies in the city. He was piper to the Federation of Scottish Societies, the Gaelic Society, the Celtic Society and the Free Mason Kilwinning Lodge in Brooklyn, New York. He was also Honorary Piper for the Lewis and Skye Associations of New York and was an honorary member of the Clans McDonald, Chisholm and McKenzie. The Scottish diaspora in New York obviously maintained an interest in piping, going so far as to have an official piper for various society events, which one would assume included funerals. Scottish organizations in North America were established to preserve customs from the old country. They sometimes offered connections for employment to new immigrants and provided a cultural safe zone in the city. It was noted that “in Harlem in the 1930s it was customary for around 400 members of the Lewis, Lewis and Skye, Celtic and New York Gaelic societies to congregate every Saturday evening for a dance” (Harper 1998, p. 100). Fraser made a living from teaching and performing, and in addition to his function as piper to these organizations, he also toured extensively with the White Heather group, performing alongside the legendary Scottish singer, songwriter and performer, Harry Lauder, during at least one North American tour. The tune played at Fraser’s funeral was “Lament for the Children”, an example of *ceòl mór*. The tune is very old and reputed to have been composed by Patrick Mór MacCrimmon in the mid-1650s after an epidemic killed seven of his eight sons.

One of the most memorable events of the modern 20th century was the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas, Texas, on 22 November 1963. His funeral, held three days later, was attended by pipers from two military units. Ten pipers from the Imperial Black Watch in Scotland, who had previously performed with their unit on the White House lawn a few days before the assassination, played in the procession from the White House to St Mathews’ Roman Catholic Cathedral. Pipe music was again present as the President’s coffin was being lowered into the grave, while the Pipes and Drums of the United States Air Force played “The Mist Covered Mountains”. According to one source, this was President Kennedy’s favourite pipe tune, and he had remarked that “because of the melodic air, it surely must be Irish!” (liner notes, *The Black Watch, War Pipe, and Plaid* 1966).<sup>8</sup>

The selection of bagpipe arrangements of a Gaelic song for a funeral tune is not uncommon among pipers, nor is it a recent occurrence. In the Gaelic community of Glen Morrison, Cape Breton, at the

<sup>8</sup> This album also featured a musical tribute to John F. Kennedy that included “The Mist Covered Mountains” and a new composition, a hornpipe named for the late President and composed by Canadian piper, Bill Gilmour.

turn of the last century, the Gaelic song, “Cùl Beinn Eadarra” (The Back of Ben Eadarra) was played by John MacPhee (c. 1841–1923) as a funeral dirge (Figure 3) (Creighton and MacLeod 1964, p. 118).

**189. Cùl Beinn Eadarra** **Lament**  
The Back of Ben Eadarra Arr. Barry Shears

**Figure 3.** *Cùl Beinn Eadarra* (The Back of Ben Eadarra), reprinted from Shears, *Play It Like You Sing It* Vol. 2 [p. 181] with permission from Bradan Press.

Over time, contemporary or familiar melodies continued to become acceptable, indeed preferred, as funeral laments.<sup>9</sup> This transition from *Corronach*, to Gaelic song, to popular music has become more obvious with the introduction of “Amazing Grace” to the piper’s repertory.

“Amazing Grace” is an 18th-century Christian hymn with words composed by Anglican clergyman and former slave trader John Newton (1725–1807), from London, England. The hymn was popular in parts of the United States in the mid-19th century and was sung to various melodies. It was recorded by singer Judy Collins in 1969, and the song was a commercial success in Britain. The performance of “Amazing Grace” by the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards in 1972 catapulted bagpipe music into popular culture with a bagpipe arrangement of the hymn, which is said to have been influenced by Collins’ recording. It climbed the pop music charts and became a #1 hit in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Canada and Australia, as well scoring high in the American charts at the time. The performance of “Amazing Grace” by the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards propelled the tune into the pipers’ repertory, and it is one of the most frequently requested pipe tunes for funerals today. It was played at the funerals for both former US Presidents Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford. The frequency of requests for this tune has become off-putting for some pipers, who occasionally refer to the tune as “Amazing Disgrace”. Despite this pejorative title, the melody is widely known to both pipers and non-pipers alike, so much so that it has been said the general public are only aware of two bagpipe tunes: “Amazing Grace” and “Scotland the Brave”. Despite the predominance of this tune at funerals, pipers are very much at liberty to select additional music from a broader catalogue of acceptable tunes.

#### 4. Conclusions

Providing music for funerals was one of the many roles for a piper in both Scottish and North American societies. The increasing prominence of the Highland bagpipe in Gaelic society and the

<sup>9</sup> Pipers have continued to create new music to express loss. Two laments with a Nova Scotian connection were composed in North America in the 20th century by two pipers who had served during the First World War. These were “Courcellette” and “Captain Angus L. MacDonald”. The first was a lament composed by Pipe Major Jock Carson to commemorate the 25th Battalion’s losses during the Battle of Courcellette, 15 September 1916 (Tennyson 2007, p. 210), and the second was composed by Pipe Major Fraser Holmes, New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, entitled “Captain Angus L. MacDonald, Lament for a Friend” (Shears 1991, vol. 1, p. 75). Angus L. was the last Gaelic-speaking Premier of Nova Scotia, and both he and Holmes served in the 85th Battalion, Nova Scotia Highlanders, during the First World War.

decline of harp playing and professional women singers employed at funerals raised the stature of the bagpipe and its music. The laments grew from a strong relationship between Gaelic poetry and piping, and pipe music at funerals became a natural progression. The *Corronach* composed in, and brought from, Scotland were panegyric poems that included words and music and were sung at funerals. Since the bagpipe is not a sing-along instrument, the words eventually became divorced from the music. The praise poem morphed into the cold obituary notice and the laments became solely instrumental music, although during much of the 19th century local Gaels could no doubt sing the words in their heads to the old songs.

The obituaries discussed above illustrate many of the characteristics of the bardic lament, and there was, and still is, a wide variety of pipe music acceptable at funerals. Pipers playing at funerals made a successful transition from Scotland to North America and later from rural districts to large urban centres. Many of the old laments, such as “Lament for the Children” and “MacCrimmon’s Lament”, have been largely replaced in many quarters by modern compositions and arrangements of tunes such as “Amazing Grace”. In modern society, funeral music reflects current aesthetics and familiar melodies. This was no different in the 18th and 19th centuries.

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