

## The Origins of the Strathspey: A Rebuttal

January 4, 2014 January 5, 2014 Michael Newton

By the 16th century Lowland texts reflect the notion that the Highlands were a repository of older Scottish customs and traditions, and Macpherson's *Ossian* (1760) only popularized and reinforced this idea. Music and song collectors of the 18th and 19th centuries, responding to the perceived crisis of Scottish identity and tradition in an assimilationist and anglocentric polity, looked to recover the remnants of Auld Scotia amongst the peasantry, not least that of the Highlands. It has become conventional to interpret Highland music and dance traditions as essentially conservative and preserving indigenous elements specific to the Gaelic community, often reflective of older Scottish practices.

Yet, against this convention of Highland conservatism, I have emphasized in recent publications that there is also much evidence that Highland music and dance tradition incorporated many innovative, incoming elements in the 17th and 18th centuries and that what is now considered "ancient Highland tradition" is actually a hybridization of Gaelic and mainstream Western European aesthetics and elements of relatively recent provenance.

The Strathspey (or "Strathspey reel"), with its characteristic "Scotch snap," is arguably the most distinctively Scottish form of instrumental music now practiced by musicians and so its origins and formation would seem to be of particular significance to those interested in the nation's musical history. William Lamb (2011-13) has recently published an innovative and provocative article ([https://www.academia.edu/4007917/Reeling\\_in\\_the\\_Strathspey\\_The\\_Origins\\_of\\_Scotlands\\_National\\_Music](https://www.academia.edu/4007917/Reeling_in_the_Strathspey_The_Origins_of_Scotlands_National_Music)) about the nature of the strathspey and its origins, posing the following arguments:

1. That the "Scotch snap" has a very high rate of occurrence in Gaelic songs, much higher than that of English or Scots.
2. The main characteristics of the strathspey (dotted notes, Scotch snaps and 4/4 time) can be found in a variety of Gaelic song genres, including waulking songs and higher-register songs dating back to the 16th century.
3. The strathspey is a "general style of playing and singing for Reels" that "must have developed as part of [Gaelic] tradition" and "could have been a pre-Reformation development."
4. "Gaelic work and dance song stem from a common root."
5. The oldest titles of strathspey tune titles indicate that most if not all derive from Gaelic dance songs, even though masked with English equivalents dedicated to wealthy patrons (such as "Lord X's Reel").
6. The standard account of the origins of the strathspey – that it developed in the region whose name it bears – is an erroneous one influenced by two factors: (a) a popular travel narrative published by William Thomson in 1791 of his tour around Scotland, which incorrectly ascribed the genre to this area; (b) the fact that the Central Highlands were a permeable buffer zone between Lowland, anglophone Scotland and Highland, Gaelophone Scotland meant that this was simply the region

most known to anglophones who used the term “strathspey” as a synecdoche for Gaeldom as a whole.

William Lamb’s article is a tribute to his Gaelic scholarship and his musical abilities (being a fine performer himself). Will is a friend of mine (we overlapped as PhD students at the University of Edinburgh) and we’ve been communicating and collaborating on these musical puzzles for several years. While I think that he has proven the first two points beyond doubt, they become increasingly dubious thereafter. I hope to maintain Will’s friendship while disputing quite vigorously some of his conclusions in this blog entry, which I hope will provoke further and wider discussion.

Will’s most important insight is the notion of a Gaelic rhythmic matrix into which instrumental music was interpreted by performers, a strong preference for particular patterns of accentuation and “snaps.” For all of his discussion of the strathspey and the connection between music and dance, however, he never defines these genres with any detail nor does he incorporate modern research on the history of social dance music of the British Isles into his analysis. Once this is done, Will’s conclusions cannot stand, as I hope to show in this blog entry.

Uncovering the point at which, and process by which, an innovation (whether internally generated or externally encountered) becomes tradition can be extremely difficult because those who advocate for, benefit from or accept innovations create self-authenticating lore which erase such seams once the innovation has been assimilated. King Máel Coluim mac Donnchada of Scotland (aka Malcolm Canmore, 1031-93) is a favorite figure to invoke in origin legends (appearing, for example, in those claiming to explain the origins of the sword dance *Gille Chaluim* and Highland Games): he is one of the earliest Scottish kings with a Gaelic identity and widespread name recognition (especially for an anglophone audience), his historical reality would seem to endorse the veracity of whatever narrative into which he was inserted and he lived long enough ago that there is little chance of documentary evidence appearing to contradict the claims of foundation myths involving him. Not satisfied with the antiquity of the 11th century, however, one informant of the School of Scottish Studies attributed the creation of the sword dance to one of Noah’s sons, improbably named “Calum” (SA 1953.165.8). We cannot take such narratives seriously as historical evidence about the origins of traditions: we instead need to see them as the expressions of desire to validate present practices through historical antecedents and to create a seamless garment of a past which was, in reality, full of dead-ends, gaps and transitions.

All innovations provoke some negative or defensive responses and we must be attentive to the fragmentary evidence left in the wake of such encounters, especially amongst those most threatened by the innovation, which were not retroactively expunged in the written and oral record. I have engaged in such exercises on the history of the incorporation of the bagpipe into the Highland musical norm (Cheape and Newton 2008), as well as on the emergence of the forms of social dance (and associated instrumental music) in the late 17th and early 18th-centuries (Newton 2013). These are both exemplary cases of how external stimuli and non-Gaelic genres were eventually assimilated within Gaelic norms during a process of hybridity to result in what is now perceived as “traditional Highland music.”

These cases are also worth stressing because they bear directly on this question of the emergence of instrumental music associated with social dance, especially that played on the fiddle. In the former article, my collaborator and I demonstrated that the bagpipe and the violin (resisted largely by the older musical order, especially *clàrsach* players) were accommodated into Highland musical tradition by specialization and compartmentalization. The fiddle was seen as most appropriate for social dancing and had a very different role from those of the bagpipe and *clàrsach*. In the latter article, I demonstrated that the forms of dance which we now take for granted as traditional in the Highland canon are really the result of the incorporation of innovations (and displacement of older forms) which are derived from

early modern French court culture, even if filtered through intermediaries such as the English and Scottish court and dancing masters trained in Paris and London. These conclusions are important given the correlation between dance and musical forms.

There is an interesting parallel between the emergence of the strathspey reel in mid-18th century Scotland and the emergence of reggae music in mid-20th century Jamaica which is worth elaborating. The dominant characteristics of reggae are its rhythmic emphasis (a strong “backbeat” and percussive emphasis on third beat) and its slow, relaxed tempo. These characteristics are, at least in part, significant symbolic markers of Jamaican cultural identity from that formative period, assertions of African-ness and Rastafarian-ness.

Yet, it would be naive (and mischievous) to claim that reggae is an ancient musical genre brought by African slaves to the Caribbean. There are certainly continuities in the rhythmic matrix of reggae and these may have been emphasized, at least in part, intentionally as a strategy to assert cultural (and musical) identity at a time when Jamaicans were encountering a wide variety of new musical genres emanating from the American continent. Asserting these rhythmic characteristics allowed incoming musical forms to be safely incorporated into Jamaican musical life, and indeed for new varieties to be spawned which are specific to Jamaica. Reggae music is not the music of Africa, however, but that of modern North America, the result of processes of hybridization with contemporary musical forms, especially R&B and jazz, and dependent upon modern technologies (electrified instruments). In other words, these musical markers of communal identity allowed Jamaicans to maintain distinctiveness at the same time that it participated (as an unequal partner) in much larger musical developments. Reggae is not a rejection of Rock ‘n Roll, Rhythm and Blues, or any other American musical form – it is a distinctly Jamaican response to these developments, an intentional reshaping of popular musical genres to Jamaican aesthetics.

It is my contention that we see an analogous phenomenon happening in mid-18th century Scotland as Gaelic-speaking musicians and audiences are encountering new instruments (particularly the modern violin) and genres (social dance music). Gaelic musical aesthetics – informed strongly by the rhythms of Gaelic speech and the precedents of Gaelic song – provide the rhythmical matrix into which the incoming innovations are safely assimilated, allowing Gaels to simultaneously participate in contemporary musical developments and create their own regional inflection of it.

The strathspey reel was, then, a product of hybridization between Gaelic rhythms and non-Gaelic musical forms happening primarily in the buffer zone between Highlands and Lowlands where Highland gentry were welcoming foreign musicians (and styles) and where Highland musicians were competing for the same limited patronage, asserting regional distinction and a kind of musical patriotism to do so.

## Genre

In support of Will’s assertion that “strathspey” is a way of interpreting instrumental music, there is an obsolete genre called the “strathspey minuet,” mentioned as early as 1745 (see *The Lyon in Mourning*, vol. 1). This form seems to have been abandoned in the early nineteenth century, but its existence and lifespan suggest several important things. First, that “strathspey” referred to a style of playing and thus it was necessary to distinguish between specific genres to which it was applied (the strathspey *reel* rather

than the strathspey *minuet*). Second, this style of playing was being applied to a mainstream form of music of non-Gaelic origin associated with elite circles in the case of the minuet, and there is no reason to doubt that the reel was ultimately also of non-Gaelic origin. Third, in both of these cases we are clearly witnessing hybridity between Gaelic forms (and associated musical aesthetics) and external innovations happening in the interface between Highlands and Lowlands, and between the elite and Gaelic tenantry. Finally, the victory of the strathspey reel and the extinction of the strathspey minuet reflects the preference of recently-emerged regional genres associated with the peasantry of the British Isles over that of continental elites.

Given the notion that the strathspey was a rhythmic matrix into which some form of instrumental music was interpreted, we then have to ask what kind of music this was. After all, the strathspey *reel* has to be more than a “general style of playing” (as Will calls it) – it must have melodic and structural features as well. The underlying form of the strathspey reel is not the Sami *joik* or Icelandic *rímur*, but rather a form of social dance music which is evident throughout regions associated with the peoples of the British Isles in the eighteenth century, whether in Britain, Ireland or North American colonies.

The most insightful and concise historical overview of the evolution of this genre which I have found to date is by the accomplished American scholar Alan Jabbour. He asserts that while a few older tunes persisted, most of what still survives in this family of tradition

arose in the latter half of the eighteenth century. They constituted a revolution in instrumental folk music, and in the dances that instrumental folk music accompanies. The advent and democratization of the modern violin spurred the revolution. [...] The revolution occurred roughly simultaneously in all regions of the English-speaking world, so that the modern repertoires and styles might better be considered cultural cousins than ancestors and descendants of each other, even if some of the cousins are from New World regions. But each region developed its own version of the new revolution, tapping into regional and ethnic musical tastes and preferences. (2008: 11-12)

Jabbour’s definition of this social dance music genre in structural terms is as follows (9-10):

- (1) The tune is structured into two “strains” of 16 beats each;
- (2) Each strain is repeated twice (yielding AABB);
- (3) The first strain (A) is in a lower pitch register, while the second strain (B) is in a higher register;
- (4) The second strain is usually a simple variation of the more distinctive first strain.

The characteristics of most tunes in the strathspey reel category are very well encompassed by this definition, and these characteristics are very different from other Gaelic song genres (*luinneag*, *òran-luaidh*, *dàn*, etc.). Not only that, but the structure of this social dance music genre correspond closely to contemporary choreographic structures. Given that these forms are found over such a large territory beyond Gaeldom, we can hardly avoid the conclusion that this social dance music (reel, jig, hornpipe, etc) was assimilated into the Gaelic Highlands after coming from elsewhere.

As I have already demonstrated (Newton 2013), the dance forms that are now associated with the Highlands and survive to the present have their ultimate origins in the French court and certainly do not represent any “pre-Reformation” traditions, as Will suggests. Those that preceded the dance revolution emanating from the French court (which were certainly penetrating the Highlands in the 17th century) would have resembled the nearly-universal choral dance (Newton 2006; 2009: 272-9) or folk dance-

drama (Newton 2011). I would recommend dancing a medieval *branle*, a Faroese danced ballad, a Bulgarian *horo* and a Transylvanian chain dance to gain a kinesthetic appreciation of the range of possible forms that may have existed in the Highlands in earlier eras.

There are a number of stages of experimentation and assimilation that we can expect when a community encounters and incorporates a new genre or form of expression (other than rejection amongst the disaffected). First there will be imitation of the new form and an attempt to “translate” older items into the new genre. As the new hybrid form begins to consolidate and practitioners become more confident in their abilities, entirely new compositions are created and less successful results from earlier stages of experimentation lose appeal. The community becomes more comfortable with and accepting of the genre, especially by some form of accommodation between old and new, and a few older items may survive (via some form of hybridization), but as a whole, the newer form is accepted. Whatever differentiates the new hybrid from what prevailed before – whatever new twist this community has put on the hybrid – becomes the new symbolic marker of identity, rather than the older genre(s) displaced by the new form.

This is precisely what I see in the evidence available from the 18th-century Highlands regarding social dance and its instrumental music. The rhythmic matrix of Gaelic speech and song, characterized by the Scotch snap, allowed the new social dance music to be assimilated and yet acquire particularly Gaelic features. As frequently happened, the rest of Scotland looked for a musical genre that would most differentiate it from anglophone Britain and found it in Gaeldom. Notice, however, that this genre is not one specific to or limited to Gaeldom (such as *dàrain-luaidh*), but rather a Gaelic inflection of an international musical movement.

Another pillar of Will’s argumentation is the list of tune titles from *A Collection of Strathspeys* published by Angus Cumming in 1782. There are a total of 60 tunes, all but one of which have English names, most of which are generics which incorporate the name of an aristocrat as a kind of dedication. Of these 60 tunes, 27 of them also have Gaelic names, albeit so poorly written as to require significant reconstruction. After some collaboration, Will and I are fairly confident about our reconstruction of the following list of Gaelic titles:

1. “Faire, Faire Dhunnchaidh”
2. ✓ “*Bog an Lochain*”
3. “Bail’ (Bàl?) nan Granndach”
4. “Is iomadh duine dallanach”
5. “Bha mi raoir ’nam chaithris”
6. “Còignear Sgallag”
7. ✓ “*Ceann Loch Àlainn*”
8. “Tiugainn dachaidh null dha’n Àird” [Àird Mhic Shimidh]
9. “Poll Mór”
10. “Taigh ’n Dùin”
11. ✓ “*Biodag air MacThòmais*”
12. “Èirich, a bhuid, èirich”
13. “Fhuair thu urram a choisinn thu”
14. “Tom Nathairn”
15. “Nighean a’ bhodaich sin ri’n aodann”
16. “S ann a-raoir a bha a’ bhanais”
17. “A’ phit dhubh”
18. ✓ “*Seann Triubhais Uilleachain*”

19. "Ceum Diùlnaich"
20. "'S ann a-raoir a bhog am Fiannach"
21. "Bail' an Aodainn"
22. "Thàini na bodaich, ho ró"
23. "Maol Ruadh"
24. "Pinnt Lionn Cheana"
25. "Ruidheal Air an Ùrlar"
26. ✓ "A' chaora chruim"
27. "Bruadar Fear a' Mhullaich Àird"

For Will, the English titles of the tunes obscure earlier Gaelic forms: "It is incontrovertible that the Gaelic titles in Cumming's collection, overall, have an earlier provenance than the English ones." (73) He asserts that the English titles are simply a way of courting patronage by incorporating the names of potential employers.

I think that the evidence should be read quite differently. I find it significant that, despite the late date of the collection (1782), so *few* of the Gaelic titles can be recognized from surviving Gaelic sources (a total of 5, or 8%, those italicized and marked with a check mark above). Although most of these titles clearly belong to the social life of the peasantry, even a few of these seem to be related to aristocratic life or aiming for the attention of noble patrons (namely numbers 8, 10, and 27). Thus, these titles also seem to depict a musical genre still maturing and not yet corresponding to the surviving repertoire of *puirt-à-beul*.

This further supports my contention that elite patronage, especially in the Central Highlands, was crucial for the introduction and early development of social dance music until it became adopted and further developed by the Gaelic peasantry. The sifting process of oral tradition and musical performance amongst the Gaelic peasantry in the late 18th and 19th centuries has seemingly discarded a great amount of the intermediate materials from the repertoire.

Will uses a quote from Francis Peacock (written 1805) which suggests that reel dancing came "naturally" to Highland youth and extrapolates from this that it was an old and well-established form in the region. This excerpt from Peacock is too late and broad a statement to be useful, however. We do not know anything about these youth – what age they were, where they were from, or what social class they belonged to, or even the specific choreographic elements to which Peacock is referring. Dancing masters had already been operating in the Highlands for several decades at this point and social dancing had become well established in aristocratic centres (a quick scan through *The Lyon in Mourning* substantiates that point).

Elsewhere in his dancing manual, Peacock explains the actual purpose of teaching dance: to teach grace and manners to the youth, including Highland youth. This training in areas of deportment and physical carriage would not be necessary if they were "in-born propensities" (see discussion in Newton 2009: 281; 2013). A Highland fondness for reel dancing in 1805 does not guarantee its existence in 1745 or 1705 or any previous era, just as a Jamaican fondness for reggae in 1975 cannot be assumed to exist in 1905.

I might offer, however, a couple of highly speculative comments about the "Highland aptitude" for the leg movements inherent to the social dance styles dominant in the 18th century (well articulated leg lifts and an emphasis on the front rather than back of the foot). First, there was the necessity of dealing with steep inclines in the Highland terrain which require very similar foot and leg responses (a point made to me long ago by James MacDonald Reid). The second suggestion concerns the term *ceum a' mhonaidh* ("the heather loup" in Scots), used by John MacInnes in one of his Gaelic articles. Upon asking John the

meaning of the term, he explained (if I remember correctly) that Highlanders used to be easily recognized by others, especially in Lowland urban settings, for their characteristic gait, the result of stepping over the large tufts of heather that permeate the Highland landscape. Whether or not these physical tendencies influenced the Highland fondness or natural proficiency for reel dancing I must leave for further speculation.

## The Emergence of *Port-á-Beul*

The Gaelic term *port* refers specifically to instrumental musical tunes (as opposed to vocal genres such as *òrain luaidh*, *dàin*, etc) and since the 18th century it has referred specifically to tunes associated with social dance music – the reel, strathspey, jig, etc. (Newton 2009: 248-53, 262-72). While the connection between song and tune is an old and fundamental one in many societies, including Gaeldom, I do not think that the notion that *port-á-beul* is any older than the instrumental musical genres which it imitates is tenable (that is, the 18th century). As a genre it has remained distinct from vocal song genres in Gaelic musical tradition, of lower literary register from song-poetry (Sparling 2000; Newton 2009: 271-2).

I have previously remarked that *port-á-beul* was the Gaelic verbal response to instrumental social dance music, a means of incorporating the new genre by assimilating it to Gaelic linguistic and musical norms:

When the modern violin arrived in Scotland in the seventeenth century it came with a new style of dance music which, once reshaped by native musical sensibilities, evolved into distinctively Scottish forms, particularly the reel and strathspey. These tunes, primarily instrumental and played specifically for dancing, are referred to in Gaelic as *puirt* (plural, singular *port*). As they became ‘verbalised’ in song form (known as *port-à-beul* ‘mouth-tune’) for the purposes of memorising and teaching, they acquired the rhythms and cadences of Gaelic speech. ... mnemonic verbalisations, sung for dancers if instruments are not available. (2009: 253)

While Will demonstrates his familiarity with my remark by quoting it in his article, he has misconstrued my observation by asserting that I am claiming that all Gaelic social dance music was “composed originally on the fiddle and that words accreted to them *ex post facto*” (Lamb 2011-13: 72). This is not at all what I have suggested. As I have outlined (in the Genre section) above, once an innovation (such as social dance music) is accepted and absorbed by a community, it can become a productive genre in which new compositions are created. The modern violin *was* a new instrument in the late 17th-century Highlands and *must* have had music played on it by its exponents which was unfamiliar to a Gaelic-speaking audience at that time. Gaels may have imitated the melodies with *puirt-á-beul* at an early stage (there are, after all, some melodies were recorded in Highland contexts well before the corresponding Gaelic texts). After the genre matured in the Highlands and performers were confident of their command of the idiom – apparently from the mid-18th century onwards – new compositions certainly could be made initially or simultaneously as *puirt-á-beul* and later played on instruments.

The oldest reference to *port-á-beul* of which I am aware relates to an anecdote about none other than Bonnie Prince Charlie himself. In the memoirs compiled by the Reverend Robert Forbes about the 1745-6 Jacobite Rising, the Prince while on the run in the Highlands sees some Gaelic women at the shieling, and attempting to keep the mood light, says to them: “Come, my lasses, what would you think to dance

a Highland reel with me? We cannot have a bag-pipe just now, but I shall sing you a Strathspey reel.” (*The Lyon in Mourning* vol. 1, 109). This is clearly an allusion to singing *port-á-beul* of the strathspey variety.

The Prince is known to have been learning Gaelic while in Scotland and two of his companions during the 1745-6 Rising were noted Gaelic songsters, Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair (aka Alexander MacDonald) and Iain Ruadh Stiùbhart (aka John Roy Stuart). The latter was not only from the Central Highlands but also one of the only poets to whom *port-á-beul* is attributed by name. As a well-educated and well-travelled multilingual Gael and native of the Central Highlands who composed in a number of musical-literary genres, Stiùbhart personifies the hybridization that I am advocating for the strathspey (see discussion in Newton 2013: 67-8).

As Lamb has previously discussed (2012: 21-3), dating *port-á-beul* by internal evidence alone is particularly difficult because there are few things mentioned in it which are specific to a particular period of time. For example, while tobacco snuff and obsolete coinage are mentioned in verse, these could relate to any period of time from the 17th century to the 19th century.

There is, however, an important aspect of *port-á-beul* texts which I believe does allow us to date surviving texts to the late 18th century and thereafter, and that is the lack of class distinctions in the Gaelic society it depicts. The contrast with *òrain-luaidh* (“waulking songs”) is remarkable. As songs of manual labour, waulking songs are tied specifically to the lower orders of Gaelic society. Surviving *òrain-luaidh* texts seem to have been composed between the 16th and 18th centuries. In all of these, there is a high degree of consciousness of class distinctions: the “voice” of the narrator or singer belongs to the peasantry, but s/he makes frequent remark upon the life of the aristocracy and relations with them.

It is extremely rare for *port-á-beul* to reflect such class consciousness: it seems instead to depict the life of the peasantry, devoid of consciousness of or interaction with the nobility, a “flattened out” Gaelic society. These are exactly the conditions of the post-Culloden Highlands. Note that the *port-á-beul* texts for tunes in the Cummings collection whose Gaelic titles mention aristocrats have not survived.

## When and Where

If the strathspey did not originate in the associated area, why was the term used both in English and Gaelic for this form of reel before and after Thomson’s 1791 travelogue? Could his travelogue alone be responsible for confusing natives of the area about their own musical history? I think otherwise.

A thorough examination of tune titles in manuscripts would be instructive and while I cannot offer that study here, I will make a few observations on the manuscripts given in the appendices of Emmerson’s *Rantin’ Pipe and Tremblin’ String* (1971). A manuscript of Highland Reels written by David Young c.1734 uses the term “rant” and “reel” in 44 tune titles but there are no occurrences of “strathspey” (224). The term “strathspey” appears in the title of 2 of the 18 dances in the Menzies manuscript of 1749 (224). The manuscript compiled by James Gillespie of Perth in 1768 demonstrates a keen interest in social dance music (226-30): the fourth section, “Hornpipes, Jigs and Reels,” is the largest section of his work, consisting of 107 tunes, of which 6 are labelled as strathspeys. This seems to indicate a growing presence of the genre over some four decades of the mid-18th century.



Simon Fraser was a native of the Central Highlands and a noted fiddle player. His 1816 collection of tunes *The Airs and Melodies peculiar to the Highlands of Scotland and the Isles* contains an entry whose bilingual title is pertinent to this investigation: “Srath-Spè, ‘Strathspey.’ The Native Country of the Sprightly Dance” (63). He provides an endnote about this item, which reads as follows: “In passing through the district of Strathspey, the traveller may be apt to forget, that among the long ranges of firwood and heath on each side, originated that sprightly style of performing and dancing the music which bears its name, now in universal request from the Spey to the Ganges...” (109). Given the older sources upon which Fraser has drawn and the authority which his work has otherwise earned, it would be odd if he had been misled by a recent anglophone travelogue.

Once a genre or canon is well established, it is not unusual for it to be a topic of discussion in the medium itself (think of Bob Marley’s song “Roots, Rock, Reggae” or the numerous country-western tributes to pioneers of that genre). The earliest example relating to Highland social dance music of which I am aware in Gaelic sources is the song “Moladh Iain Duibh Ghearr MhicGriogair a rinn seann Ruidhle Thulaichean” (“Eulogy to Iain Dubh Gearr MacGregor who composed the old Hullachan’s Jig”). This song was composed by Iain MacGriogair (*Am Bàrd Smeatach*) and published in his 1801 collection of poetry (although he says that many of his songs were composed c.1785). The subject of the song is a real historical figure, something of a “Highland Rogue” active in the 1630s (Stiùbhart 2009: 166-9). At the very least, MacGriogair’s poem is a creative exercise in (musical-)historical reconstruction attempting to elevate the prestige of his namesake who is credited (fancifully) in this song with creating Hullachan’s Jig as he fled from Perthshire to Speyside:

*Bu Ghriogarach dha-rìreamh*

*Á Ruadh-shruth an Gleann Lìomhann*

*A rinn an cèl tha rìomhach*

*Ris an canar “na Tulaichean.” ...*

*Tha Tulach Gorm is Seann Triubhas*

*Ro ainmeil anns an àm seo;*

*Is ged a tha, cha samhl’ iad*

*Do m’ annsachd, na Tulaichean. ...*

*Thuirte Iain Dubh is e tionndadh,*

*“On rinn mi ’n gnìomh bha ’shannt orm,*

*Ghaoil, grad-thoir deoch de’n leann domh*

*Is gun danns mi na Tulaichean.”*

It truly was a MacGregor from Roro in Glenlyon who created the music which is delightful, which is called “Hullachan’s Jig.” ...

Tullach Gorm and Seann Triubhas are very famous at this time, but even so, they are no match for my beloved [music/dance form], Hullachan’s Jig. ...

Iain Dubh said as he turned, "Since I did the deed that I desired, darling, quickly give me a drink of the ale, so that I may dance Hullachan's Jig."

I am not aware of any genuine early evidence to sustain the claim that Iain Dubh Gearr created this or any other music/dance composition. MacGriogair's poem is probably intended to smooth over the discontinuities of the music and dance tradition of the previous several generations by attributing a popular contemporary dance to a legendary figure of the previous century. The poet is surely making a connection between Iain Dubh Gearr's exile in Strathspey, the innovating centre of Highland music and dance during the lifetime of *Am Bàrd Smeatach* himself, and the ascendance of the area in these art forms. It is also interesting that music and dance forms are equated, and that texts of this nature took so long to emerge in the Gaelic record.

The Gaelic song "Ruidhle Mór Strathspey" (Glenmore 1859: 157; Forsyth 1900: 413), attributed to Robert Grant of Rothiemoon, Abernethy parish (very close to the Spey itself), is another example of reflexive commentary (it seems to be in 4/4 time but I am not sure of its actual song type).

The song text refers to Pàdraig Bàn Grant, a celebrated piper and fiddler from Abernethy, Strathspey, and an anecdote about him in another text (Stuart 1896-7: 47) seems to date the song to 1820. The first two stanzas are significant for what they say about the region as a crossroads for musical styles but also about the assertion of the native strathspey against incoming foreign genres:

*Thoir Tulach Gorm dhuinn, rìgh nam port,*

*Na Tulaichean is Drochaid Pheairt,*

*Is gun danns sinn dhut le'r n-uile neart*

*Ruidhlean mór Shrath Spé.*

*Droch shiubhail air jigs, quadrilles, and waltz,*

*Tha peasanan toirt nall á France;*

Our Queen, God bless her! likes to dance

*Ruidhlean mór Shrath Spé.*

"Give us Tulloch Gorm, the king of tunes, the Reel of Tulloch, and Perth Bridge so that we may dance with all of our might, the great Reels of Strathspey."

"Away with the jigs, quadrilles, and waltz that the peasants are bringing over from France; Our Queen, God bless her! likes to dance, the great Reels of Strathspey."

While the peasantry (particularly, we can assume, soldiers from the ranks of British Regiments returning home from fighting in the Napoleonic Wars) were bringing in new fashions, even the Queen affirms the superiority of the "native" musical and choreographic traditions of the strathspey. Ironically, however, these "native" forms were not too far removed from their aristocratic origins in international court culture (as opposed to early forms of dance specific to the life of the Gaelic peasantry (Newton 2009: 273-9)), or else they would not have even been thought to be suitable for Her Majesty's attention at all! These are merely the Highland "flavours" of contemporary social dance modes.

# Conclusions

Although the “transformation” of Scottish Gaeldom was not as sudden and dramatic as that of Irish Gaeldom in the 17th century, the gradual loss of patronage for the learned orders, the anglicization of the clan élite, growing ties with anglophone areas, and the international dimension of the Jacobite movement all weakened the transmission and regeneration of older traditional forms and facilitated the assimilation of newer ones. Vernacular Gaelic song tradition persisted in Highland society at large, as did the Gaelic language itself (and its distinctive cadences), and these form the basis of the “rhythmic matrix” which Will has so shrewdly identified in his research. However, while this foundation provided some continuity of aesthetics between the early 17th and the late 18th century, the actual types of instrumental music and social dance – their forms and structures – are adaptations of externally derived models. It cannot be a coincidence that these strongly resemble correlated forms elsewhere in the British Isles (and indeed, Western Europe) and differ so much from other vernacular Gaelic forms.

Certainly one of the foremost scholars of Gaelic musical tradition in the 20th century was the late William Matheson; his contributions to both literature and music were considerable. He warns us to consider carefully each strand of Highland musical tradition in its own context, and not to confuse the newer instrumental strands with the older vocal ones (I have elaborated on this at length in a [previous blog post](https://virtualgael.wordpress.com/2013/09/15/the-fallacies-of-celtic-music/) (<https://virtualgael.wordpress.com/2013/09/15/the-fallacies-of-celtic-music/>)).

It is perhaps not sufficiently realised, even today, that this strathspey-and-reel type of music is a comparatively late importation, that it has quite a different ancestry from indigenous folk-song, and that great harm can be done by imposing its style on folk-song. (1955: 69)

While I believe that Will has correctly identified key elements of vernacular Gaelic musical aesthetics, I am afraid that a lack of attention to specific forms has allowed him to make over-reaching conclusions about continuities in Highland music and dance which are not supported by the evidence or by comparative research about the evolution of social dance (and its attendant music) in the 18th century. I suspect that, as a professional player of modern Scottish instrumental music, he is too close to those forms to imagine a time when they did not exist. While the genres of *òran-luaidh*, *luinneag*, *dàn* and strathspey reel may all contain Scotch snaps, they are different genres with individual histories and characteristics (as would be their choreographic correlatives — try dancing to an *òran-luaidh* as though to a reel). The strathspey reel must be more than just a “rhythmic matrix” or a style of playing, or it is so expansive to be anything – which it is not.

I see no reason to doubt the emergence of the strathspey reel in the Strathspey region itself as a Gaelic response to contemporary social dance developments. The patronage of aristocrats of the Central Highlands with strong ties to other regions (the Lowlands, England, France, etc.) brought new technologies (e.g., the modern violin) and exposure to innovations that promised new creative possibilities to Highland musicians. It was in this interface between Gaelic and non-Gaelic, aristocrat and tenantry, that a new hybrid form was born and that Scotland found another means of participating in international (musical) affairs while still asserting its own distinctive voice. “Play I some music!”

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## Published by Michael Newton

Michael Newton was awarded a B.A. in Computer Science from the University of California (San Diego) in 1990 and a Ph.D. in Celtic Studies from the University of Edinburgh in 1998. He is a leading authority on the literature and cultural legacy of Scottish Highland immigrant communities in America. He has written several books and numerous articles on many aspects of Highland tradition and history, and has given lectures at venues such as the Smithsonian, the Library of Congress, Slighe nan Gaidheal in Seattle, and the Toronto Scottish Gaelic Learners' Association. He has also been creating digital content since the early 1980s in the form of computer games (having been on the FTL Games team that produced *Dungeon Master* in 1987), hypermedia (creating the Celtic History Museum in HyperCard in 1991), and on-line digital collaboratories (creating *Finding the Celtic* in 2008). [View all posts by Michael Newton](#)



## 26 thoughts on “The Origins of the Strathspey: A Rebuttal”

1. **KATE DUNLAY** says:

January 5, 2014 at 12:51 am

You wrote: ‘A manuscript of Highland Reels written by David Young c.1734 uses the term “rant” and “reel” in 44 tune titles but there are no occurrences of “strathspey”.’ I had forgotten about this. (I haven’t seen Young but I read Emerson’s book over and over when I first became interested in Scottish music.) Something to consider is that James Oswald included “A New Strathspey Reel” and “The Strathspey Wriggle” in his *Caledonian Pocket Companion*, but there are no other occurrences of the word “reel” in his titles. “A New Strathspey Reel” is in Book 3 (c.1745), whereas “The Strathspey Wriggle” [!] is in Book 10 (1759). Also in book 10 is “Sleepy Maggie,” which I would describe as a reel — it is one of the few tunes in the PC that does have the feel of a reel. (Yet collections from a few decades later have many strathspeys and reels in them.) Oswald was a dancing master in Fife (before he moved to London). This makes me wonder when the Reel became a popular dance in Scotland — when it came to mean the alternation between a hey and stepping. What dances was Oswald actually teaching in the early 1700s?

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