

Sounds of the North: Sound files accompanying *From Broadside to Broadband*.

The recordings reproduced here reflect a little of the sound world of North East Scotland during the twentieth century.

Sound file 1. “Sammy Pikshule the Piper”.

Sound file 2. Bagpipe Marches, by James Scott Skinner.

Sound file 3. “Glengrant”, by James Scott Skinner.

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Sound file 6. St. Combs Walk flute band, 1975 playing “Napoleon’s March” and “In the Sweet By and By”.

Sound file 7. St. Combs Walk flute band, 1975 playing “The Auld Hoose”.

Sound file 8. Willie Kemp: Instrumental and Vocal medley, about 1930.

Sound file 9. Bob Nicol playing strathspeys and reels. (“Delvinside”, “Lochiel’s Away to France”, “Tullochgorm”, “John Son of Hector’s Big Reel”, “MacBeth’s Strathspey”, “Pretty Marion”)

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Sound file 1. “Sammy Pikshule the Piper”:

This is the earliest detailed account I know of a piper playing for wedding celebrations. He is mounted for the occasion on a pony and the language is Scots. The description comes from mid-19th century Aberdeenshire, from William Alexander’s novel *Johnny Gibb of Gushetneuk* (1871 and many later editions). One of Scott Skinner’s compositions was named “Johnnie Gibb of Gushetneuk.”

It was the custom at country weddings to gather the guests together in procession, with music, and casks of whisky and firearms, a combination which could lead to problems. “Dancie Skinner”, the father of James Scott Skinner (1843-1927) “the Strathspey King”, had to give up his livelihood as a gardener as a result of a gun misfiring at a wedding celebration, as Scott Skinner recalled in his autobiography which was serialised in *The People’s Journal* in 1923:

In those early days shooting at marriages was considered a necessary part of the celebrations. My father...was blazing away in honour of a wedding party, when the bursting of his firelock deprived him of three of the fingers of his left hand....with his usefulness as a gardener destroyed... he set himself the task of relearning the fiddle vice-versa –that is to say, bowing with the left hand and fingering with the right. A friend kindly helped to solve the problem by transposing a fiddle, and after much experimenting my father found that with the aid of a loop attached to the fiddle he was able to hold and manipulate the bow with his left hand....In time...he became an expert fiddler and the most famous dancing master on Deeside.

The account of the piper occurs in a conversation between three of the characters in *Johnny Gibb*, Hairry Muggart the vricht, his wife and Meg Raffan the henwife. The original text is as follows; an English translation is given at the end. The voice in the recorded extract is mine.

“Aifter we hed gotten a dram, we wuss’t them luck. But jist as we wus settin’ to the road, sic a reerie’s got up ye heard never i’ yer born days! Aw’m seer an’ there was ane sheetin’ there was a score—wi’ pistills an’ guns o’ a’ kin kin’. The young men had been oot gi’ ein draps o’ drams; an’ *they* hed their pistills, an’ severals forbye; an’ the tae side was sheetin, an’ the

tither sheetin back upo' them, till it was for a' the earth like a vera battle; an' syne they begood fungin' an' throwin' aul' sheen, ding dang, like a shoo'er o' hailstones."

"Na, sirs; but ye hed been merry. Sic a pity that ye hedna meesic. Gin ye hed hed Piper Huljets at the heid o' ye, ye wud 'a been fairly in order."

"Hoot, Meg; fat are ye speakin' about? Isna Samie Pikshule 'imself' jist a prencipal han' at the pipes fan he likes? Aweel, it was arreeng't that Samie sud ride upon's bit grey shaltie, an' play the pipes a' the road, a wee bittie afore – he's ill at gyaun, ye ken, an' eeswally rides upon a bit timmer kin' o' a saiddlie wi' an aul' saick in aneth't. But aul' an' crazy though the beastie be, I'se asseer ye it was aweers o' foalin' Samie i' the gutter, pipes an' a', fan a chap fires his pistill – crack!-- roon' the nyeuk o' the hoose – a gryte, blunt shot, fair afore the shaltie's niz! Samie hed jist begun to blaw, an' ye cud 'a heard the drones gruntin' awa', fan the shaltie gya a swarve to the tae side, the 'blower' skytit oot o' Samie's mou', an' he hed muckle adee to keep fae coupin owre 'imself'."

"Na; but that wusna canny!" exclaimed both Hairry's auditors simultaneously.

"Samie was fell ill-pleas't, I can tell ye," continued Hairry Muggart. "Seelence that shottin this moment!" says he, 'or I'll not play anoder stroke for no man livin'."

"Eh, but it wasna mowse," said Mrs. Muggart.

"Awat Samie was on's majesty. 'Ye seerly don't know the danger of fat ye're about,' says he. 'It's the merest chance i' the wordle that that shot didna rive my chanter wi' the reboon o't.' An' wi' that he thooms the chanter a' up an' doon, an luiks at it wi's heid to the tae side. 'Ye dinna seem to be awaar o' fat ye're about. I once got as gweed a stan' o' pipes as ony man ever tyeuk in's oxter clean connacht the vera same gate,' says Samie."

"Weel?" queried Meg.

Hoot! Fa sud hin'er Samie to hae the pipes a' fine muntit wi' red an' blue ribbons. An' ov coorse it was naitral that he sud like to be ta'en some notice o'. Nae fear o' rivin the chanter. Weel, awa' we gaes wi' Samie o' the shaltie, noddle-noddlin aneth 'im, 's feet naar doon at the grun, an' the pipes sraichin like onything. For a wee filie the chaps keepit fell weel in order; jist gi'ein a bit 'hooch,' an' a caper o' a dance ahin Samie's they cud win at it for their pairtners; for ye see the muckle feck o' the young chaps hed lasses, an' was gyaun airm-in-airm. But aw b'lieve ere we wan to the fit o' the Kirktoon rigs they war brakin' oot an' at the sheetin again. Mains's chiels wus lowst gin that time, an' we wus nae seener clear o' the Kir'ton nor they war at it bleezin awa'; an' forbye guns, fat hed the nickums deen but pitten naar a pun' o' blastin' pooder in'o the bush o' an aul' cairt wheel, syne culf't it, and laid it doon aneth the briggie at the fit o' the Clinkstyle road, wi' a match at it. Owre the briggie we gaes wi' Samie's pipes skirling at the heid o' 's, an' pistills crackin' awa' hyne back ahin, fan the terriblest platoon gaes aff, garrin the vera road shak' aneth oor feet."

"Keeps an' guide's!" said Meg. "Aw houp there wasna naebody hurtit."

"Ou, feint ane: only Samie's shaltie snappert an' pat 'im in a byous ill teen again. But I'm seer ye mitha heard the noise o' 's sheetin an' pipin', lat aleen the blast, naar three mile awa'."

William Alexander, *Johnny Gibb of Gushetneuk*, Aberdeen, 1871, pp.224-6.

It translates roughly as follows:

"After we'd had a drink, we wished them luck. But just as we were setting off, an unprecedented uproar broke out. There must have been at least twenty people shooting with pistols and guns of every description. The young men who had been distributing the refreshments had their pistols and a good many others in addition. And they were firing

wildly on both sides, until it sounded quite like a battle; and they began to throw shoes, which fell like a shower of hailstones.”

“Gosh, but you must have had a good time. Such a pity you had no music. If you’d had Piper Huljets at your head, you would have been in good order.”

“Tush, Margaret, what are you speaking about? Don’t you know that Sammy Pikshule is a very fine piper when he sets his mind to it? At any rate it was arranged that Sammy would ride a little ahead on his grey pony—he’s rather an uncertain horseman, and usually rides on a wooden saddle with an old sack beneath it. But although the pony was old and decrepit, he very nearly managed to tumble Sammy and his pipes into the ditch when a fellow fired his pistol with a resounding crack, round the corner of a house right under the pony’s nose. Sammy had just begun to blow, and you could hear the drones grunting away, when the pony shied to the side, the blowpipe flew from Sammy’s mouth, and it was with difficulty that he managed to keep himself in the saddle.”

“Gosh, how frightful!” exclaimed both of Harry’s auditors at once.

“Sammy was extremely annoyed, I can tell you”, continued Harry Muggart. “Silence that shooting this minute!” he cried, “or nobody living shall hear another note.”

“My goodness”, said Mrs. Muggart. ‘But indeed, Sammy stood upon his dignity. ‘You are clearly unaware of how dangerous such practices are’, said he. ‘It’s only by the merest chance that that shot did not shatter my chanter on the ricochet.’ And with that he carefully scrutinised the chanter from top to bottom with his head cocked to the side. ‘That was thoroughly irresponsible’, he continued, “I once had as fine a stand of pipes as anybody ever took beneath his arm, completely ruined in the very same manner”.

“Well!” queried Margaret.

“Well, of course Sammy had his pipes adorned with red and blue ribbons for the occasion and he wanted to make a good impression, so he did find the episode rather trying.

But there was little risk of damage to his chanter. Anyway, off we went again with the pony plodding beneath him and Sammy’s toes nearly touching the ground and the pipes skirling away. The young men did behave with more restraint for a little, ‘hooching’ and dancing with their girlfriends, for most of them were going arm in arm. But alas, we had scarcely reached the Kirkton fields when the shooting broke out anew. Mains’s staff had stopped work by that time, and the firing redoubled. Worse still, what had the rascals done, but to place almost a pound of gunpowder into a cartwheel boss, insert some wadding, and placed it beneath the bridge with a lighted match to it? Over the bridge we sallied, with Sammy’s pipes skirling at the front and pistols cracking behind, when suddenly the most frightful volley rang out, shaking the ground itself beneath our feet!”

“Heaven defend us!” cried Margaret. “I hope no-one was injured.”

“No, no one whatever, except that Sammy’s pony began to rear and plunge which further increased his discomfiture, scarcely surprising when one considers that the noise of the firing and the piping, not to consider the report of the gunpowder, could be heard fully three miles distant.”



Alexander was nearly an exact contemporary of Joel Chandler Harris, creator of the “Uncle Remus” stories. I would love to see a translation of this into American...



James Scott Skinner from his Logie Collection

Sound file 2. "Bagpipe Marches, by James Scott Skinner".

A selection of three marches:

"The Atholl Highlanders' March to Loch Katrine", Skinner's own "Cameron Highlanders" (a setting of which is included in the present collection), and "The Inverness Gathering", all played by Skinner himself on early recordings in his characteristically fiery and impetuous style. When we listen to the increasing elaboration of ornament along with the breakneck speed of execution, we may guess that this is Skinner's technical challenge to the pipers, effectively taking them on at their own game. Skinner was very particular about tempo. A contemporary in Aberdeen recorded that "He was a nippy little mannie, Scott Skinner. You couldna interfere wi' him. If the audience in the Music Hall began to tap their feet when he played he would leave the platform". i.e. Skinner would not allow the audience to dictate the tempo.

Sound file 3. "Glengrant" by James Scott Skinner.

This was one of a group of tunes Skinner composed for the great Scottish malt whiskies, full of tremendous energy, drive and lift, qualities he would no doubt have expected to see echoed by his dancers. In the days before he began his concert career he was a famous dancing master working all over the North East of Scotland, in an ethos obviously very different from the languorous modern dance style.

Sound file 4. “Fiddle and piano from James Duncan and Ivory Dickie, 1986.”

A set of tunes from James Duncan of the Buchan Fiddlers accompanied by his wife Ivory Dickie, daughter of J. F. Dickie, the New Deer fiddle player who was agent and friend of Skinner in his later years. This is an example of the kind of informal music making that goes on all over the North East of Scotland, music as it were in its carpet slippers. The set includes Skinner’s “Farewell to the Glen” which he wrote for his friend Colin Cameron, piper to the Duke of Fife, showing a characteristically cheeky inventiveness, perhaps hinting that this is the kind of thing pipers should play, rather than maybe the kinds of things they *do* play. Skinner restricts himself to the pipe scale, but throws his hat over the moon with regard to idiom. It would certainly go on the pipes, if anybody wanted. This is followed by J. Murdoch Henderson’s slow strathspey “J. F. Dickie’s Delight”. Henderson came from the New Deer district and was one of the leading 20th century authorities on the North-East style. Although not himself a front-line player he was a fine composer as perhaps the present tune, written in 1932, may show. Henderson’s *Flowers of Scottish Melody* (1935) is one of the outstanding modern collections and is dedicated to Lord James Stewart Murray of the house of Atholl who was long President of the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society.

The last two tunes are by myself and are included in the present collection. James sent this recording to me for comment when he and Ivory were preparing them for an intended presentation (we later discussed why he had changed the melody line...) at the launch of one of my books in Aberdeen.



Booklaunch with the editor, Lizzie Higgins and James Duncan (top) with the Buchan Fiddlers – (photo courtesy of Aberdeen Press and Journal)

This shows the Buchan Fiddlers playing my strathspey and reel, “Willie Alexander” (published for the first time in this collection) composed to mark the launch of my book *Popular Literature in Victorian Scotland* (Aberdeen University Press, 1986) along with the first publication in book form of one of a previously unknown sequence of novels by Victorian writer, William Alexander, an unrivalled master of demotic Scots prose. The leading fiddler is the late James M. Duncan, to whose enthusiasm was owed the reprinting of

J. Murdoch Henderson's classic fiddle collection, *Flowers of Scottish Melody* in that same year, which included the first publication of the lovely pastoral air *Pennan Den*. James Duncan's brother was a leading traditional singer, while his nephews went on to major achievement in piping, as solo players, creators of top competing pipe bands, and composers and arrangers of pipe music. Also in the photograph is Lizzie Higgins, daughter of Jeannie Robertson, and herself a celebrated traditional singer whose musical culture was deeply influenced by the pipe idiom.

James Duncan was, as we have said, linked through his wife's father William Dickie with James Scott Skinner. Skinner himself reflected a similar interchange between the various branches of Scottish tradition. He frequently wrote tunes for the pipes, while his fine Guarnerius fiddle had been presented to him by the family of General C. S. Thomason, the editor of the pìobaireachd collection *Ceol Mor*. Skinner had toured Canada with leading contemporary piper and dancer William McLennan, cousin of the great G. S. McLennan, who was himself a friend and musical colleague of Skinner's and played at the latter's funeral, which was led through the streets by Aberdeen City Police Pipe Band. Language was important here again: many of Skinner's airs were made into songs, the words—frequently in Scots—being supplied by his friend "Gramin", the schoolmaster of Lumsden in western Aberdeenshire. On his death, the tribute in the *Aberdeen Journal* was written by Rosehearty fiddler George Riddell, who was also a keen enthusiast for *ceòl mòr* and correspondent of J. P. Grant of Rothiemurchus.

Sound file 5. "Lizzie Higgins singing 'The Muirs of Culloden'."

This was recorded at my house at 10 Orchard Place, Aberdeen on 13th September 1985. As a teenager Lizzie had lived round the corner in Orchard Street and described swapping North East and Appalachian songs when Peggy Seeger came to stay. Fascinatingly to me this piece showed the modern pipe tradition being laid under requisition by a creative and vitally on-going song culture. Lizzie's mother, the great ballad singer Jeannie Robertson, is well known. But Lizzie's father and uncles were all pipers and her father taught her to sing after burning her chanter (on which her uncles were secretly instructing her) declaring that he would have no "she-pipers" in his house. In the process a number of fine old songs found new, and perhaps better, tunes, this being one of them. The obvious published source for this would be the setting called "Banks of Locheil" in Donald MacLeod's book 1, published in 1954.

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Sound file 6. "St. Combs' Walk flute band, 1975 playing 'Napoleon's March', and 'In the Sweet By and By'".

This was recorded informally in January 1975. There are three "Walks" in the neighbouring fishing villages of St. Combs, Cairnbulg and Inverallochy. Inverallochy's is on Christmas Day, Cairnbulg's on New Year's Day, and St. Combs' traditionally on "Auld Eel" i.e. "Old Yule".

The Walks sprang from the religious revivals in the North East in the middle years of the 19th century and the related temperance movement. Drunkenness among the old fishers was often excused on the grounds of their arduous, hazardous and uncertain profession. This was not only when they were ashore. Maritime shops known as "copers" followed the trawler fleets in the North Sea selling alcohol until they were banned by international convention at the Hague in 1887. But from the Revival Movements beginning in 1859 the temperance

movement made strong headway. The Temperance Walks with flute and drum bands quickly established themselves as one of the fixed and cherished features of local life and continue strongly to this day in these three villages. The flute band is followed by the folk of the village, each with their “walk partner”, oldest at the front and youngest at the rear, playing and walking through their own and each of the neighbouring villages before returning to their own and pausing to lay a wreath at the War Memorial.

The music played is an intriguing combination of styles and influences. There are favourite Scottish songs, with a particular predilection for Lady Nairne and the Jacobites, Temperance pieces like “Will you come to the spring?” and many, many Moody & Sankey and Redemption hymns springing from the Revival of 1874. The fishers were not orthodox in their religion. Some attended the Church of Scotland but many evangelical and Pentecostal groups also claimed their allegiance. Whilst mainstream East Coast congregations in the Established Church groaned their way through *The Scottish Hymnal*, the fishers sang this wonderful, emotionally charged, musically eloquent material that spoke to the heart as well as to the aesthetic sense. Interestingly, the St. Combs folk called the tune, universally known amongst pipers as “The Garb of Old Gaul”, by the name of “Napoleon’s March.”

Sound file 7. “St. Combs’ Walk flute band, 1975, playing ‘The Auld Hoose’”.

This shows the Walk, typically, playing a Lady Nairne song. The Auld Hoose was the old house of Gask, her ancestral home, long in peril following her parents’ exile in France after the ’45. Her family, the Oliphants of Gask, were major Jacobite activists and the “Auld Hoose” refers probably also to the “Auld Hoose” of Stuart, a sentiment which had longstanding support in this strongly Jacobite area of Scotland. The drums were old-fashioned rope tensioned affairs, the same as would have been heard at one time in all pipe and drum bands.

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Sound file 8. “Willie Kemp: Instrumental and Vocal medley, about 1930.”

This instrumental and vocal medley has Willie Kemp of Oldmeldrum “The King of the Cornkisters” on vocals and trump accompanied by Curly MacKay on the melodeon. Willie Kemp became a popular broadcaster soon after the BBC opened a studio in Aberdeen in 1923. His recordings were all made on the Beltona label in the late 1920’s and early 1930’s.

The tunes here are strongly influenced once again by the repertoire of the pipes. They are “Glendaruel Highlanders” by Alex Fettes, perhaps the best tune ever to come out of Aberdeen; next comes “Kenmure’s on and awa’ Willie”, followed by James Scott Skinner’s “Lovat Scouts” and finally the strathspey “Tullochgorm.” In this we hear Willie Kemp “diddling” a series of tunes in a way typical of domestic music making before the onset of commercial recording and broadcasting country dance bands in the 1930s and ’40s, a development interestingly paralleled in America by the rise of commercial hillbilly music and Country & Western.



Durris Kirk. Bob Nicol's grave is on the left with white flowers

Sound file 9. "Bob Nicol playing strathspeys and reels."

This is a private recording of Bob Nicol, aged about 65, playing strathspeys and reels at his home near Ballater. I went to Bob Nicol to learn piobaireachd and, while Bob frequently commented on the light music, this was not the main focus. However one night at Ballater myself and other pupils from Aberdeen found Bob preparing for his last attempt at the light music events at the Blue Banner in London. This recording was made on that occasion. Bob would sometimes say of his own teacher, John MacDonald, that he played best "in his carpet slippers", i.e. away from the competition platform.

This recording shows Bob in his carpet slippers, playing with relaxation and freedom for an audience of pupils, with perhaps just a suggestion of "OK, boys, follow *that*."

William Donaldson, 30th November 2006