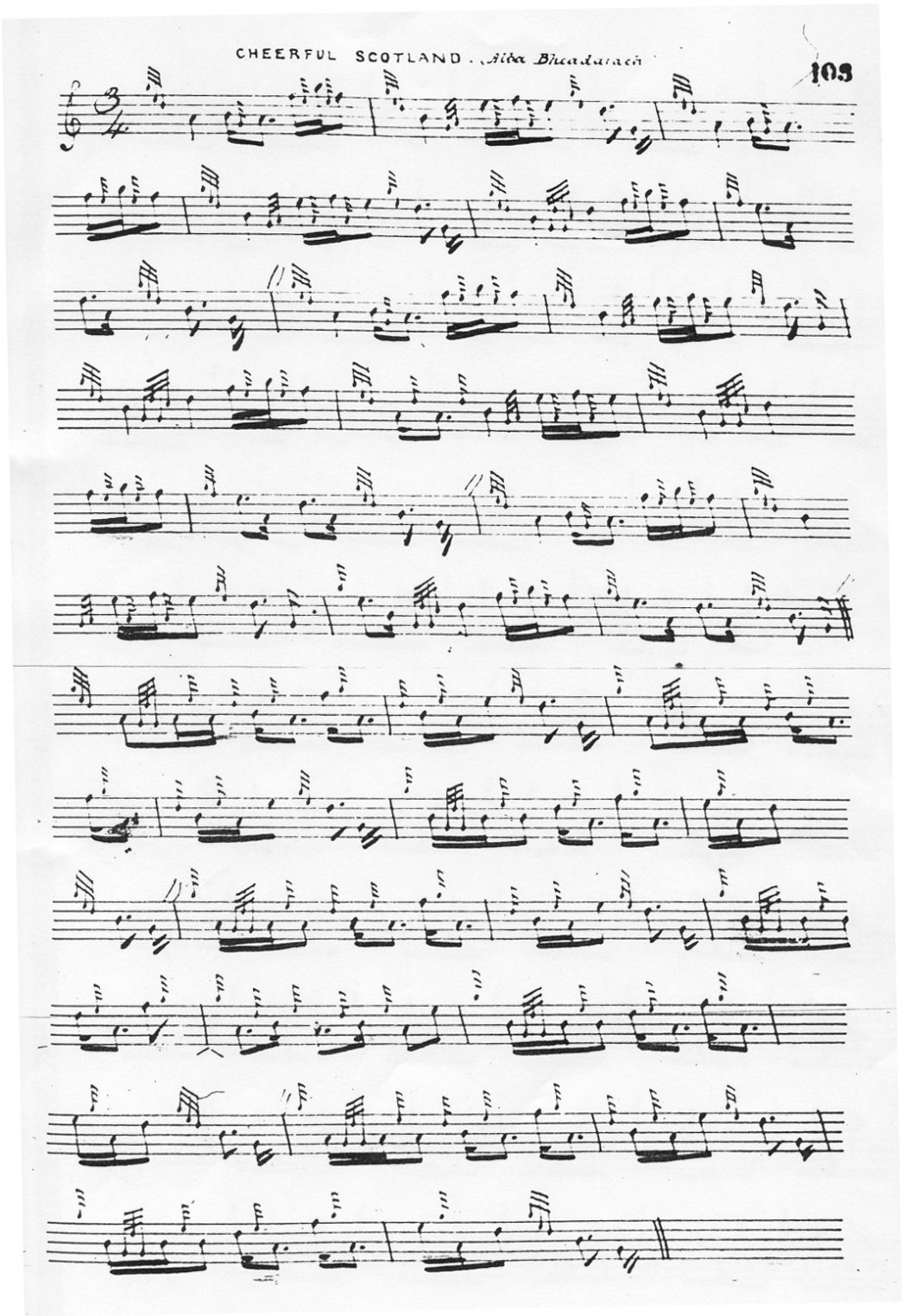
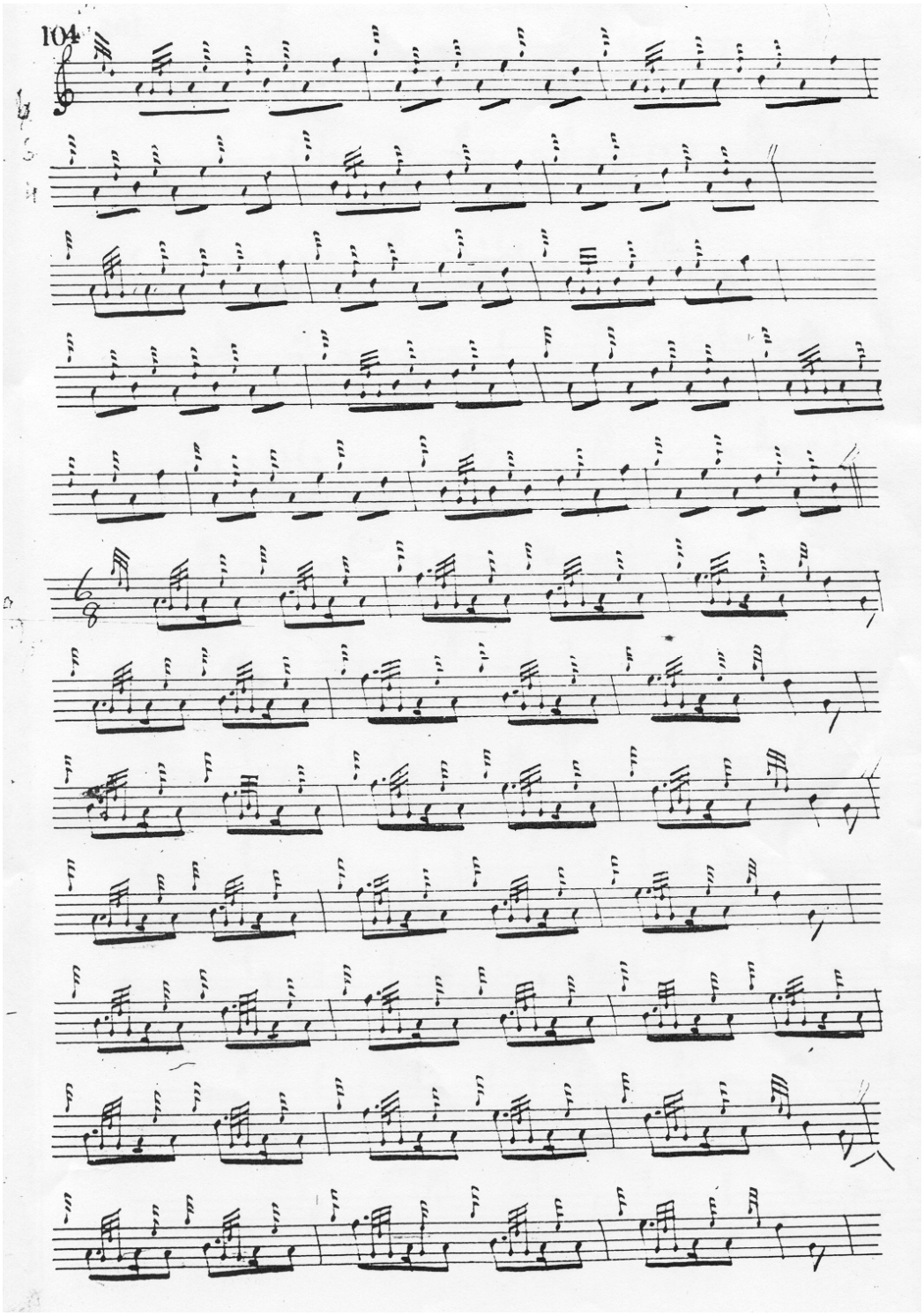
The Battle of Sheriffmuir

There are settings of this tune in the following manuscript sources:
– **Donald MacDonald's Manuscript**, ff.103-108 (with the title "Alba Bheadarach Cheerful Scotland");
– **Donald MacDonald jnr.'s Manuscript**, f.8; (with the title "The Battle of Sherriff Muir" an incomplete score giving the ground only);
– **Angus MacKay's Manuscript**, ii, ff.105-106 (the piece is also recorded in MacKay's so-called "Kintarbert" Manuscript, for a note on which see the Introduction to the 2004 Set Tunes Series);
– **David Glen's Manuscript**, ff.148-50 and again at 343-345;

and in the following published sources:
– **Angus MacKay**'s *Ancient Piobaireachd*, pp. 63-5 (with a note "Composed by Finlay Dubh MacRae. 1715.");
– **C. S. Thomason**'s *Ceol Mor*, pp. 89-90; 170;
– **William Stewart**, et.al., eds., *Piobaireachd Society Collection* (First Series), v, 7-9.

Donald MacDonald snr. sets the tune as follows in his manuscript:


CHEERFUL SCOTLAND. Alba Bhuadhach
109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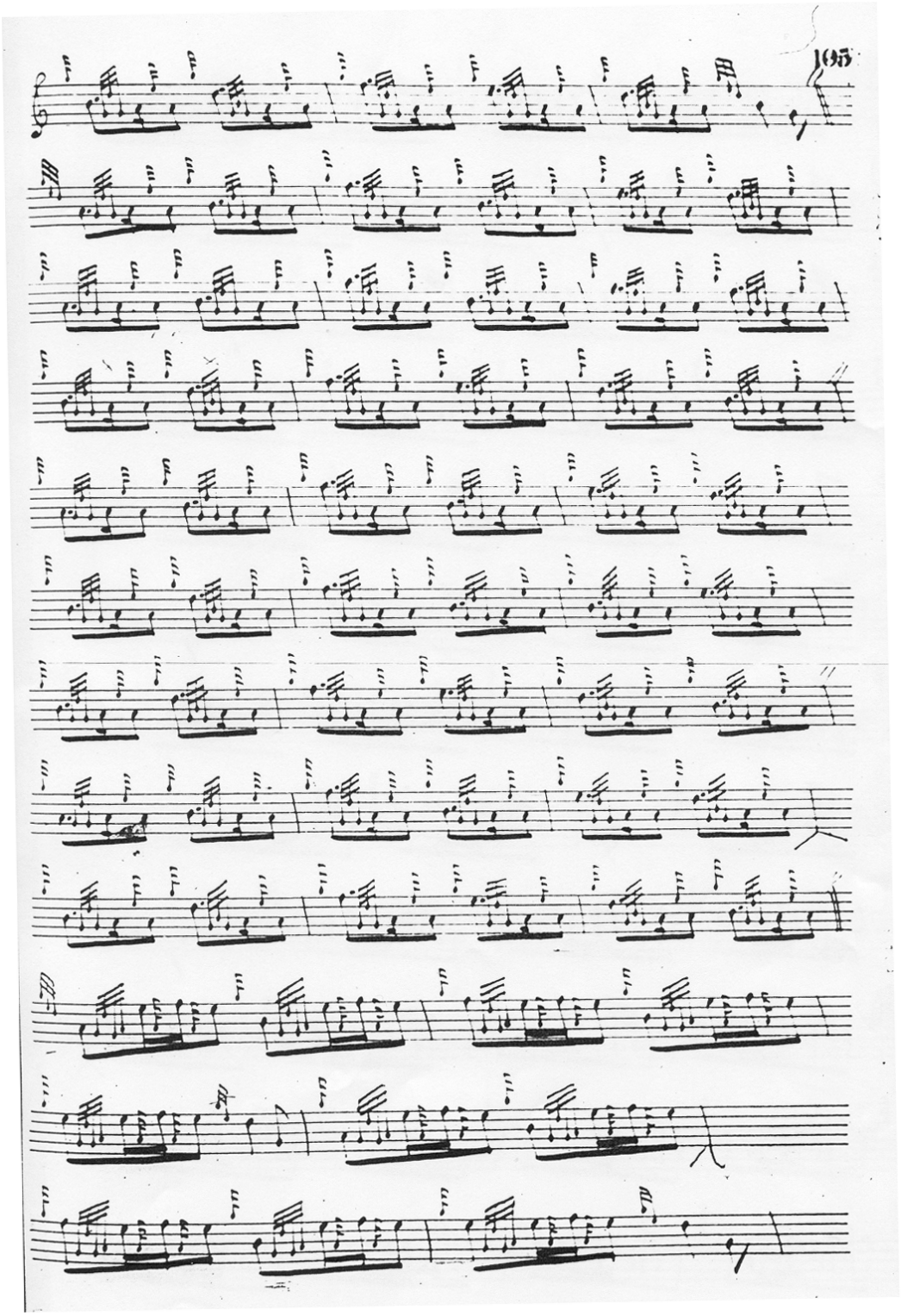
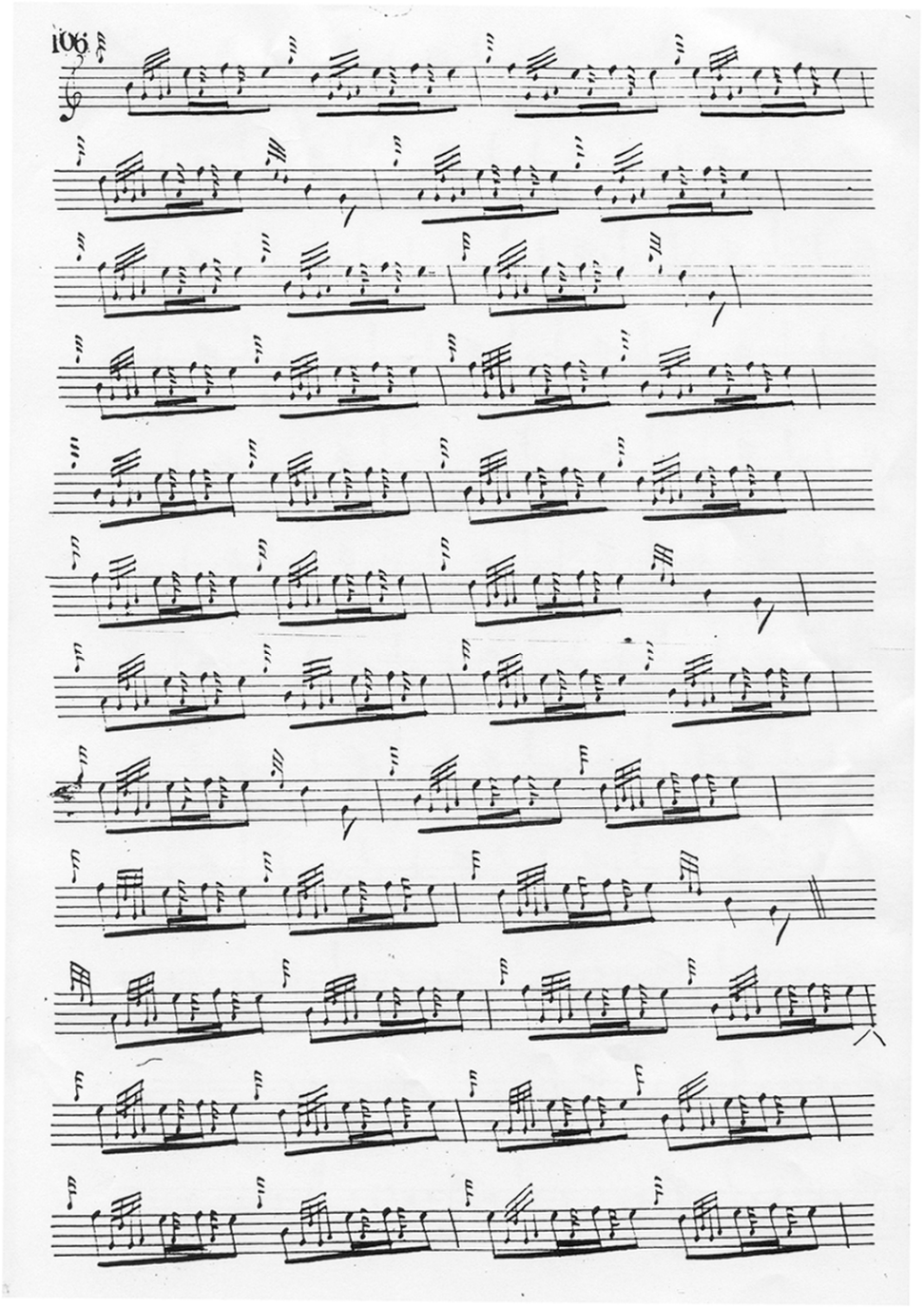
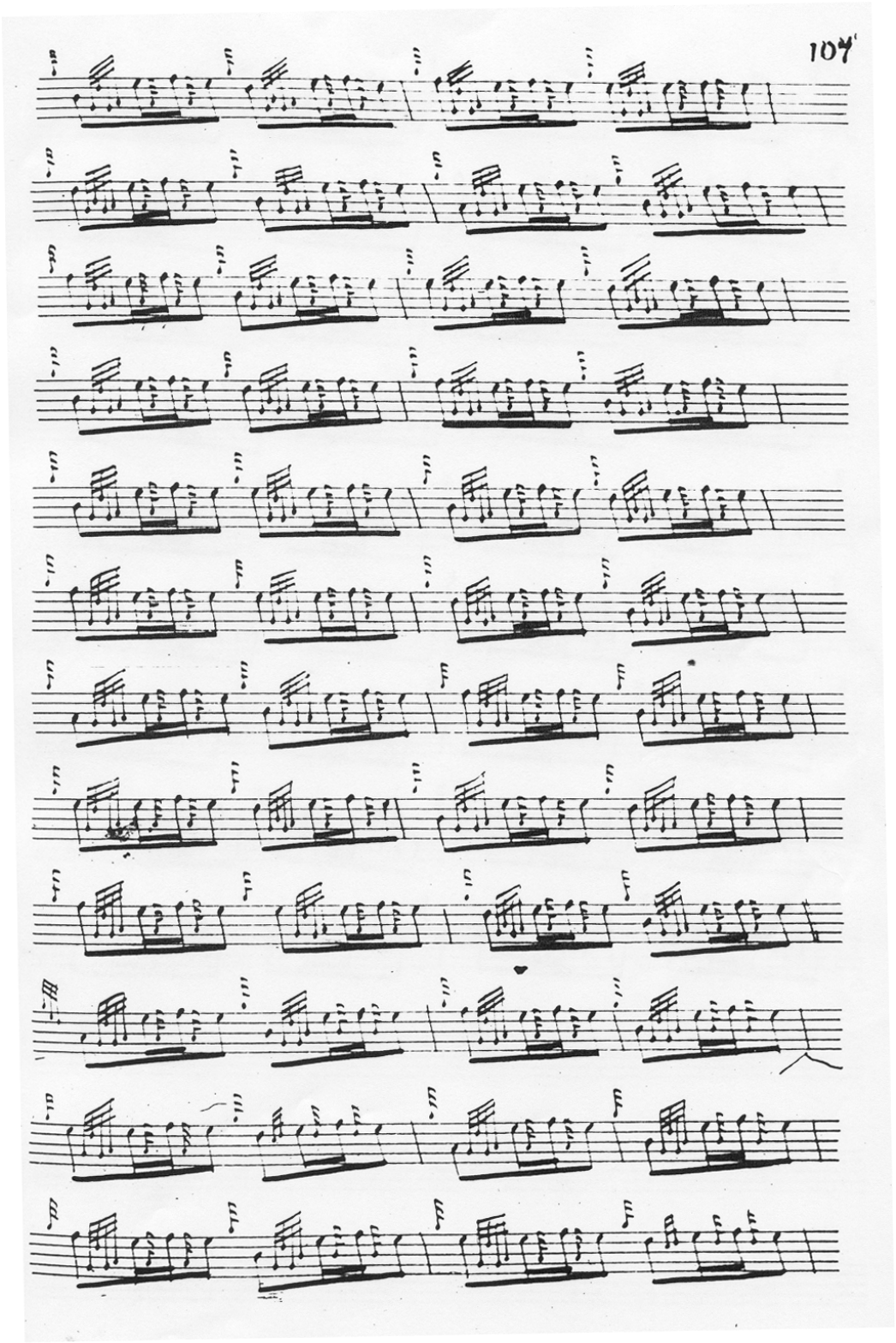
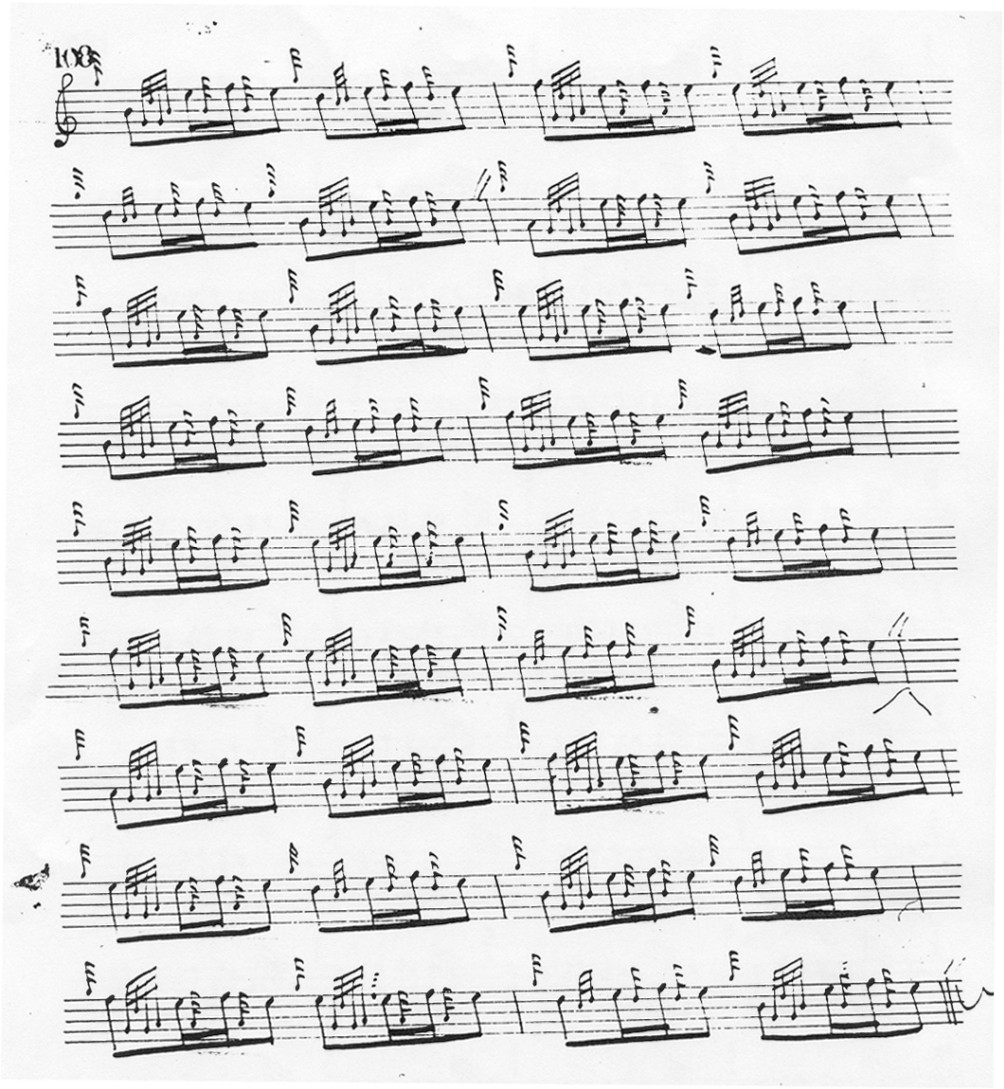



106


104



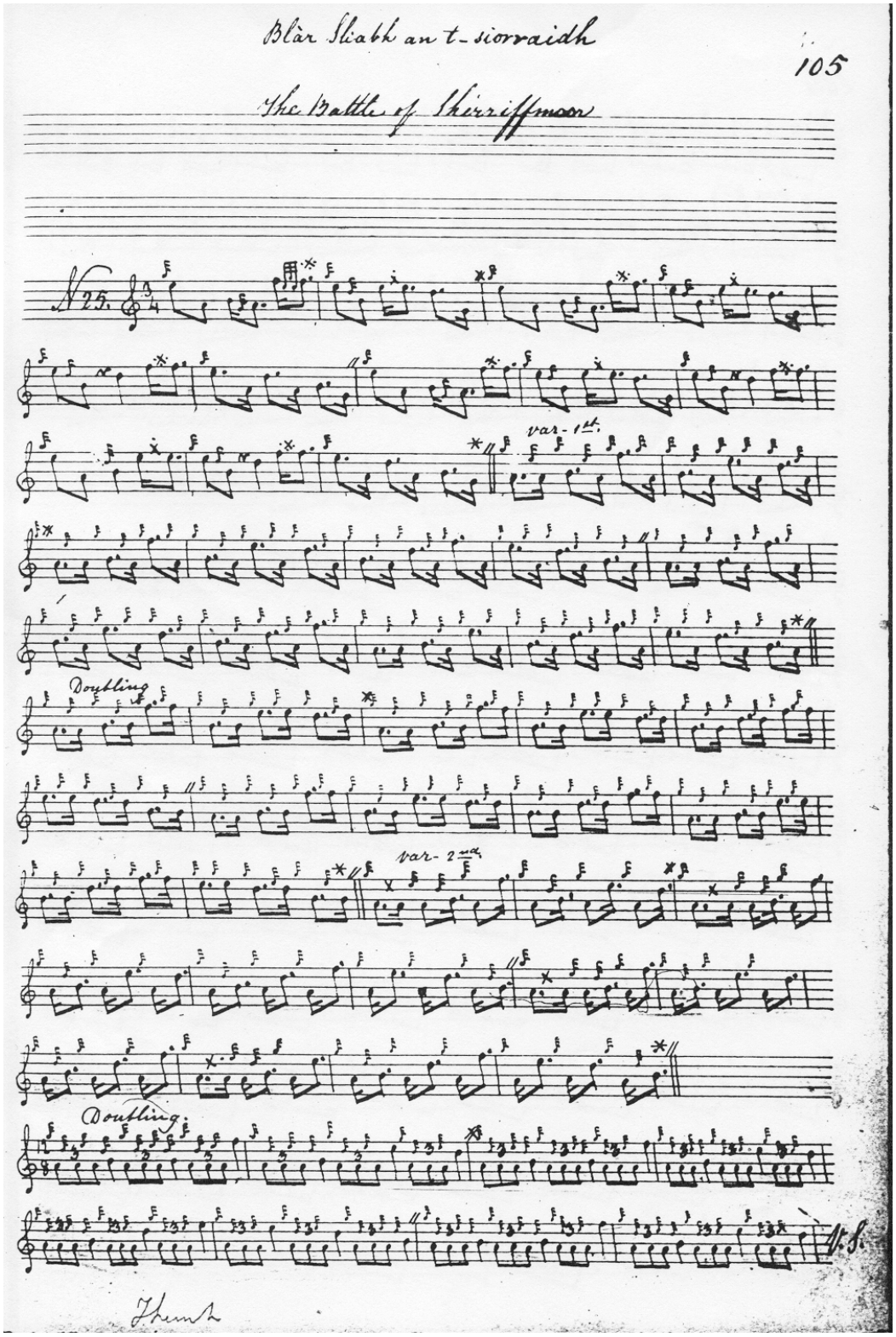
The curious-seeming timing of the first variation may perhaps indicate the movement being pointed "down" in the singling and expressed more evenly in the doubling. MacDonald includes a crunluath a mach, but gives weight to the initial quaver in his normal fashion, a pleasant alternative to the modern "cut" style. One notes too his interesting "open" a mach on D which is also featured in other tunes in his manuscript.

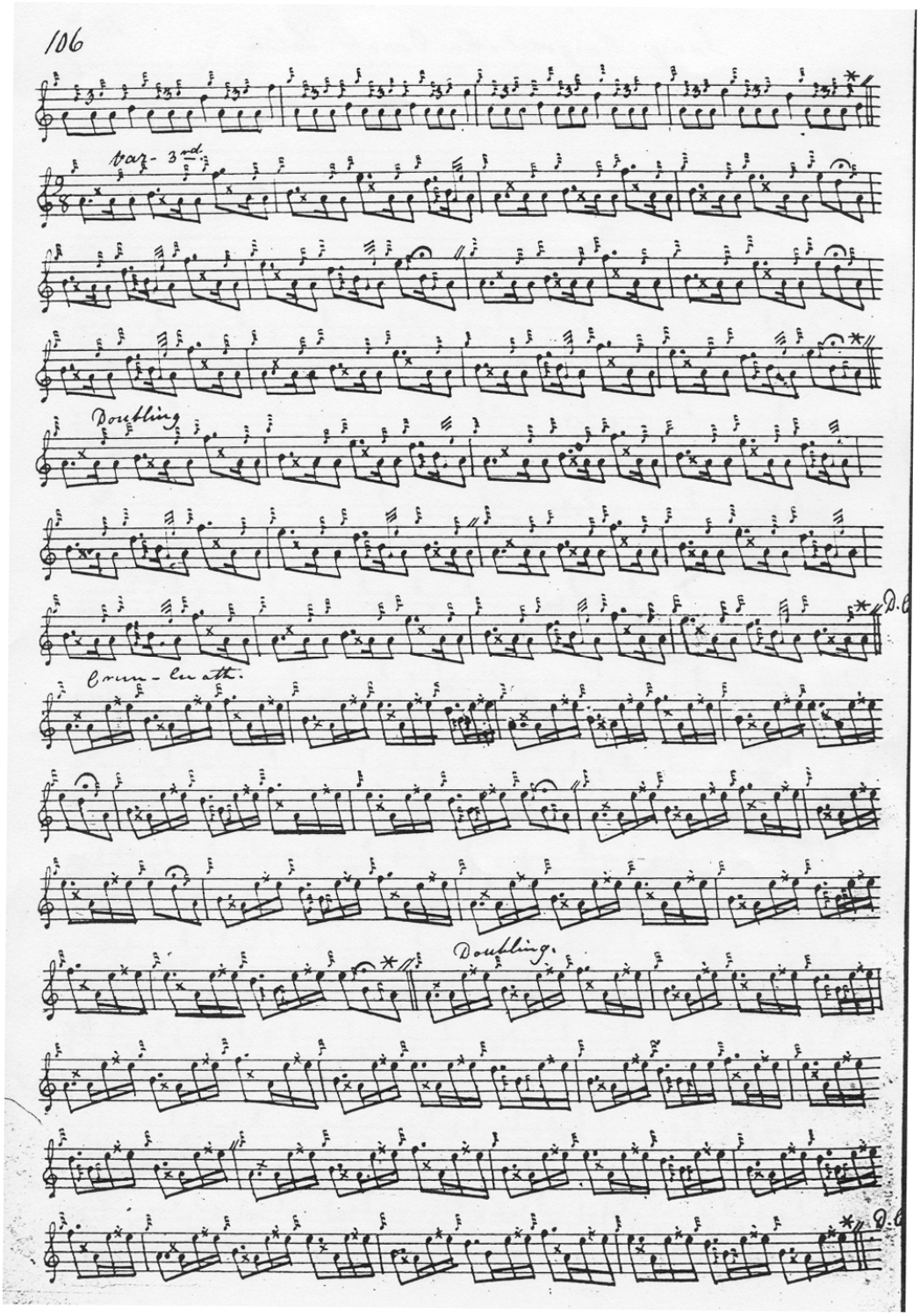
Donald MacDonald jnr.'s score is a partial one showing the ground of the tune only. It is similar in stylistic approach to his father's, but since it seems a mere outline (the notes are unaccented) it is not reproduced here.

The setting in **Angus MacKay**'s manuscript has a number of interesting features. In Variation 2, for example Mackay begins by pointing the movement "down" before switching in bar 3 to the "up" cut style, and it is interesting to reflect whether this is a simple change of mind or perhaps an indication that the movement could be cut either way, which we know

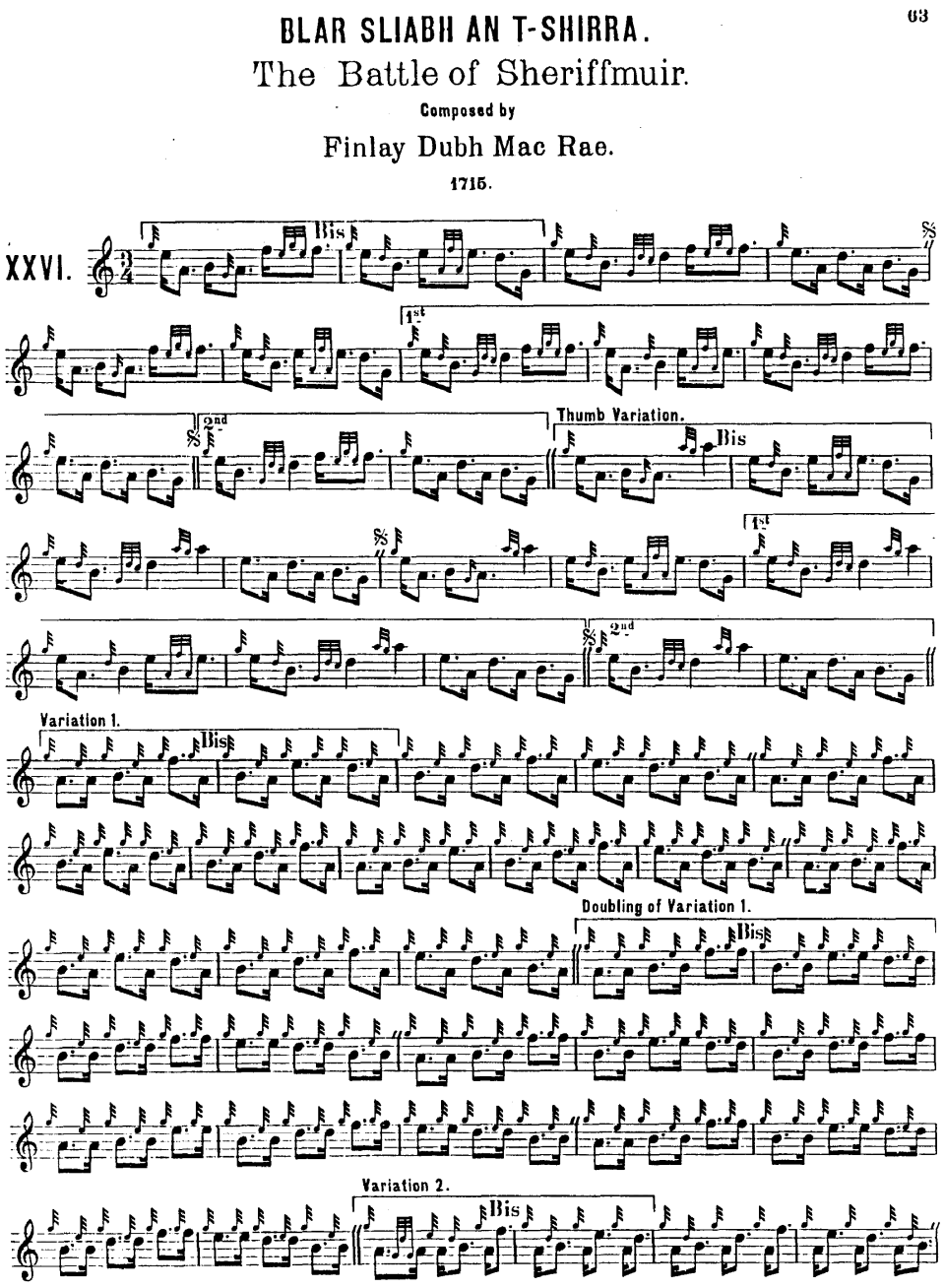
from elsewhere in the published and scribal tradition was an option open to the performer and governed simply by the surrounding musical context.

Angus MacKay's manuscript sets the tune as follows:

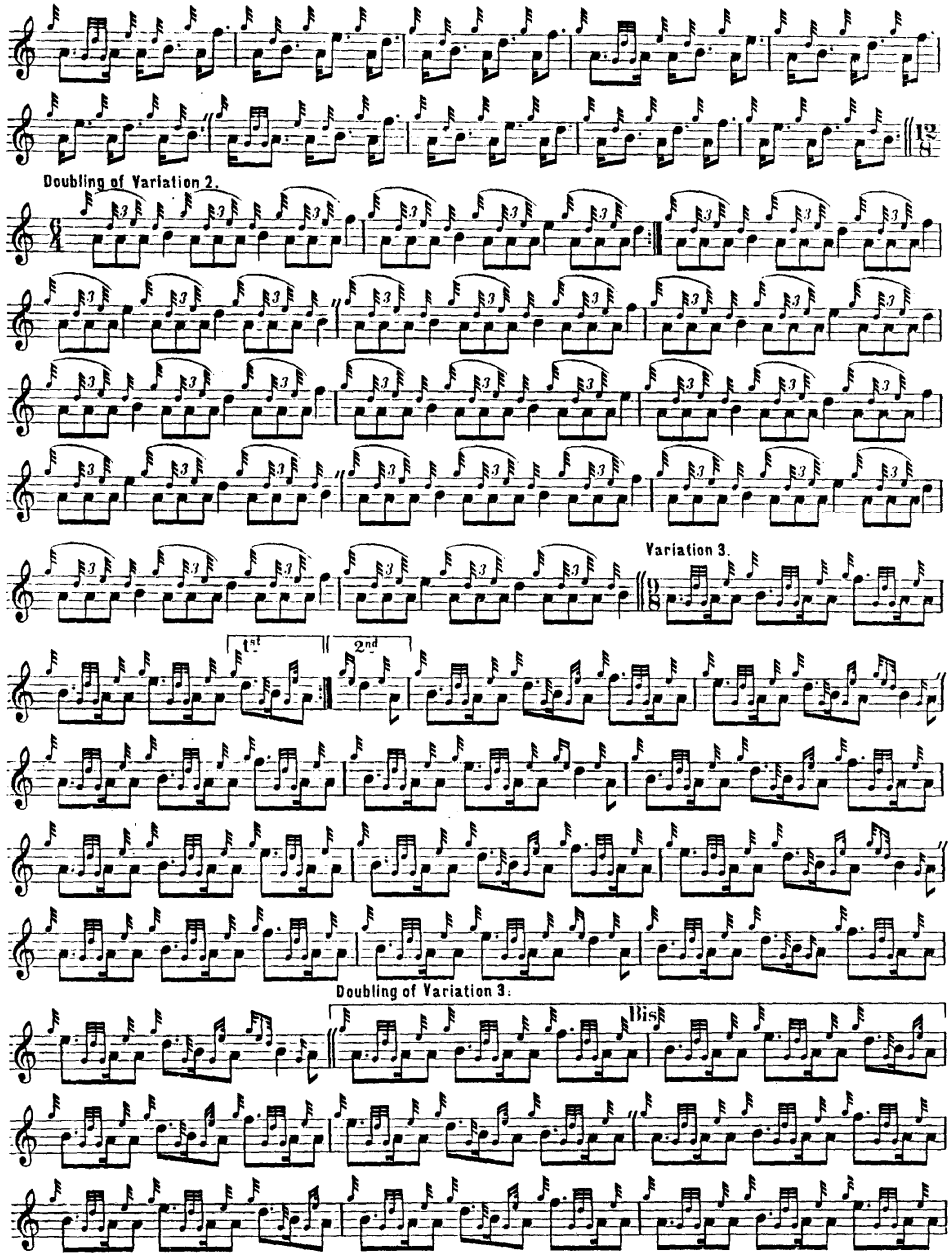

Blàr Sliabh an t-siorraidh
105
The Battle of Sherriffmoor
No 25.
var- 1st.
Doubling
var- 2nd.
Doubling
V.S.

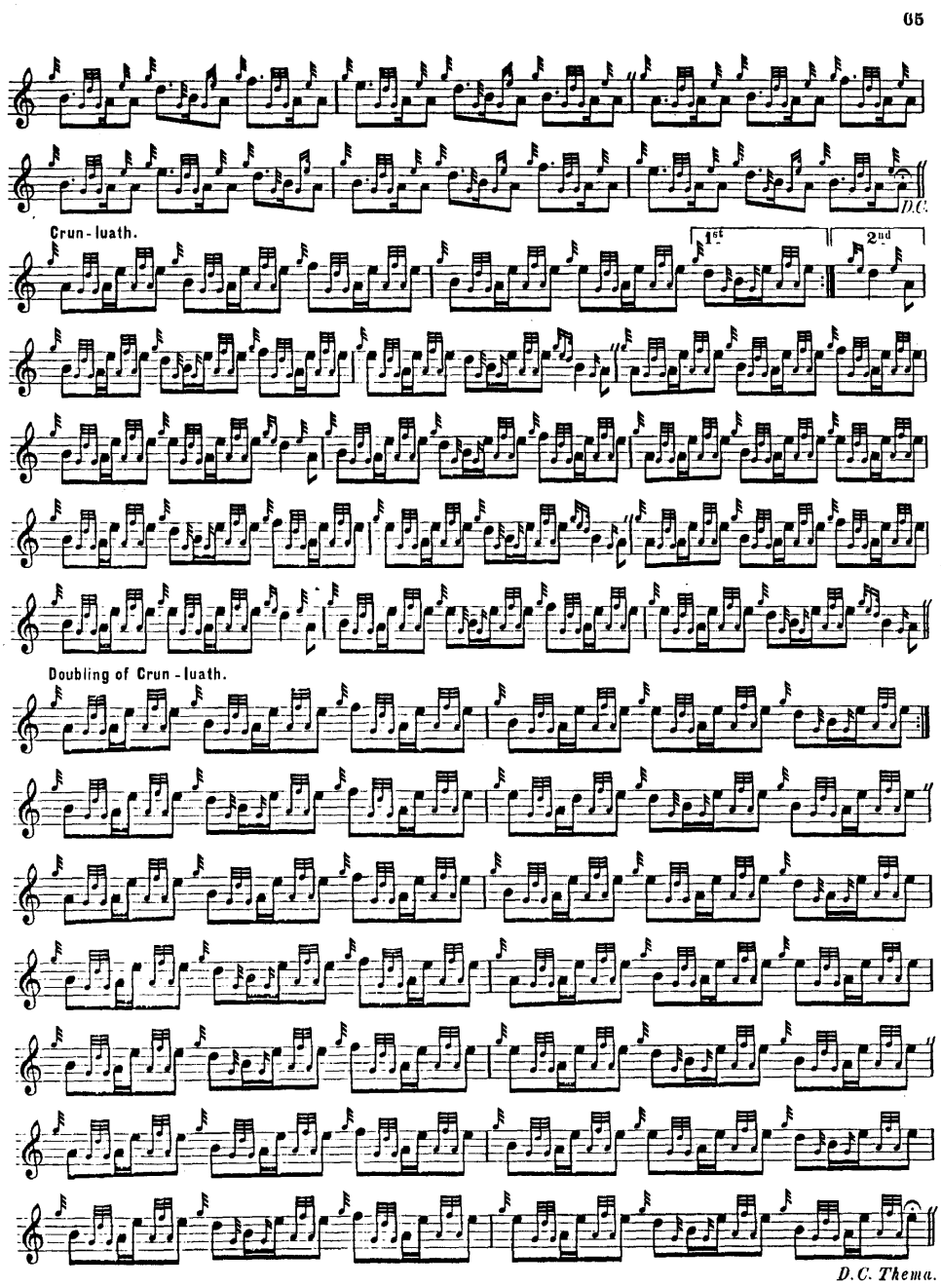

106
Doubling
Crum-Cuath.
Doubling.

MacKay's published score represents the tune in the following manner, including a thumb variation not present in the MS (a scribbled note at the bottom of f.105 seems to indicate that a thumb variation might be played, although it is not clear that it is in MacKay's hand):
:



64

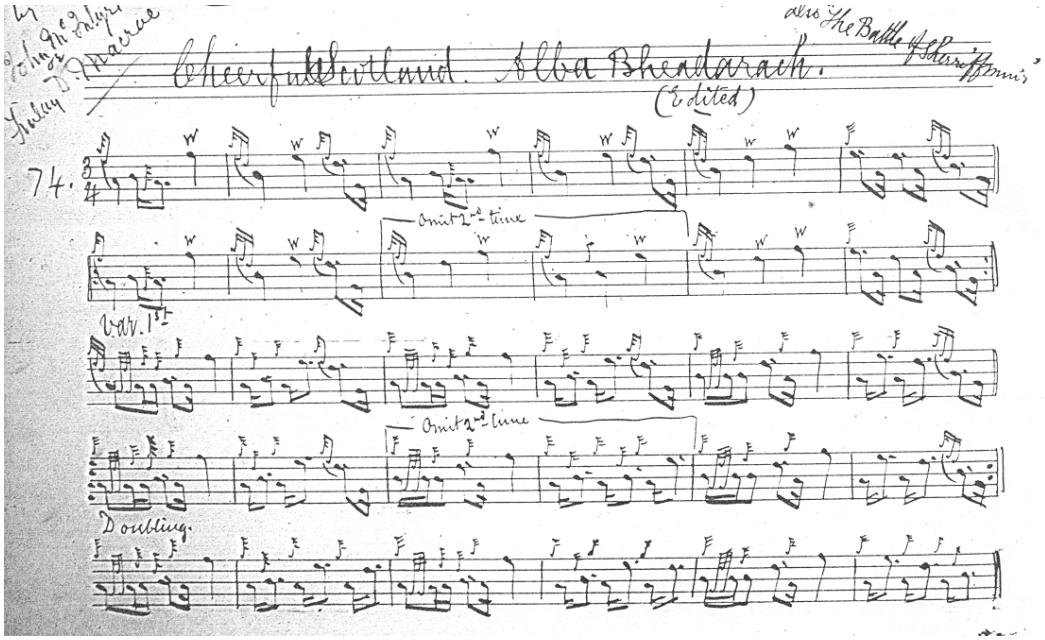

Doubling of Variation 2.
Variation 3.
1st
2nd
Doubling of Variation 3.
Bis

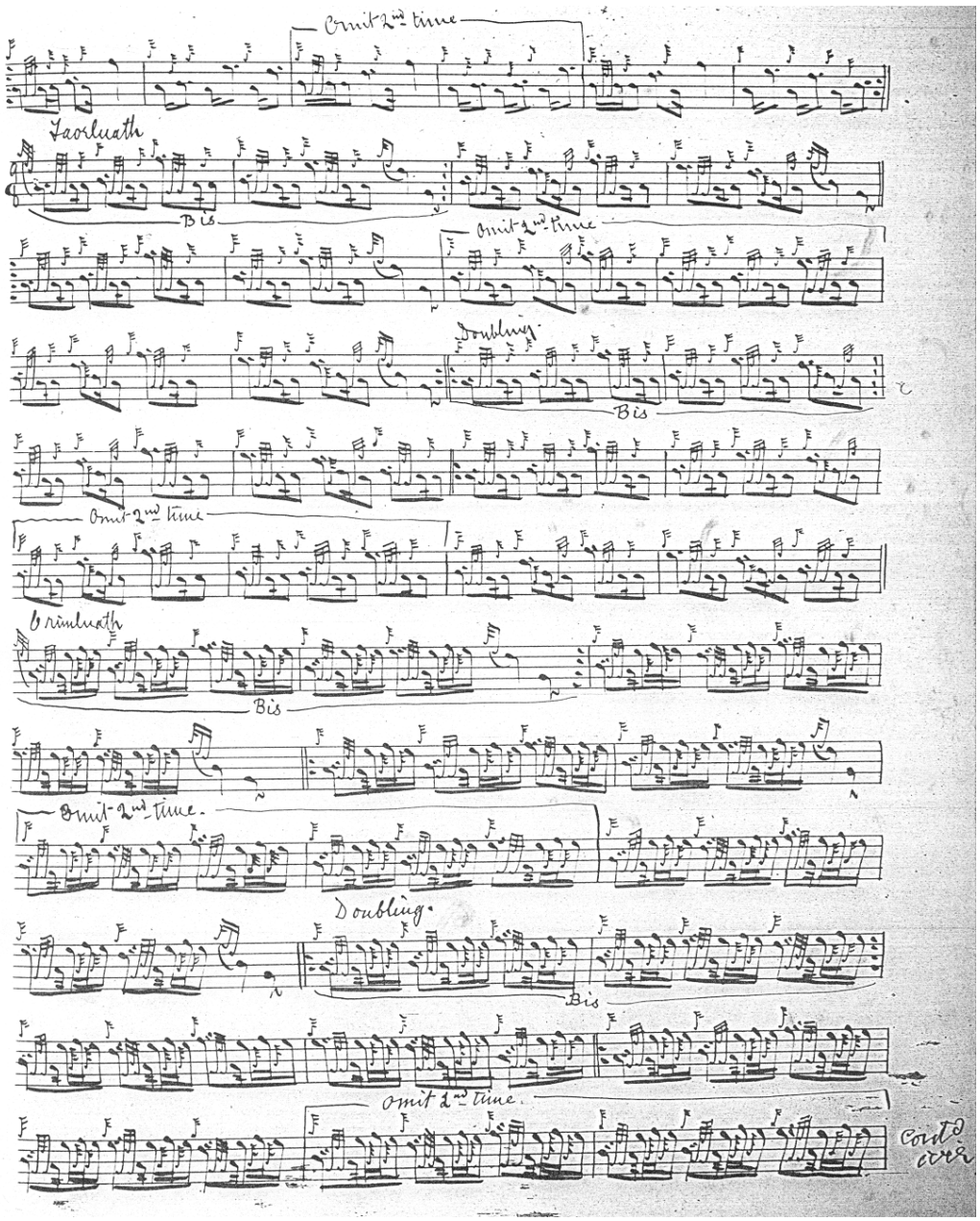


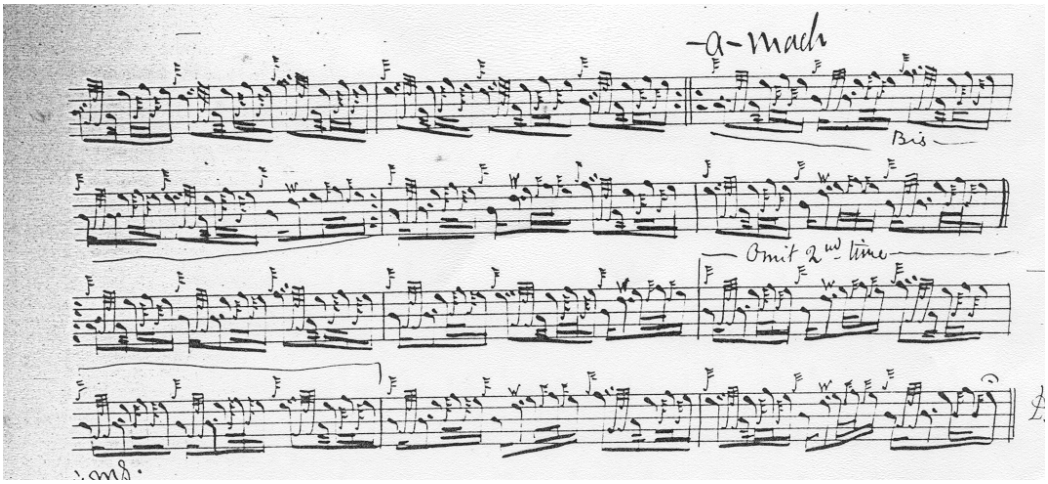
MacKay and MacDonald develop the tune in interestingly different ways: after the ground, MacDonald moves straight to a pendulum movement singling and doubling, going directly on from there to duinte taorluath and crunluath variations. MacKay is more spacious in his architecture. After his ground, he has a thumb variation and an attractive siubhal, followed by a taorluath fosgailte, which produces a pleasing variety, and many might think that from a musical point of view MacKay's might be the superior setting here:

MacDonald	MacKay
Ground	Ground
	Thumb variation
	Siubhal (singling)
	Siubhal (doubling)
Pendulum movement (singling)	Pendulum movement (singling)
Pendulum movement (doubling)	
	Taorluath fosgailte (doubling)
Taorluath (singling)	Taorluath (singling)
Taorluath (doubing)	Taorluath (doubling)
	Ground
Crunluath (singling)	Crunluath (singling)
Crunluath (doubling)	Crunluath (doubling)
Crunluath (a mach)	
	Ground

David Glen has two settings of this tune, the first (ff.148-50) is based on Donald MacDonald's MS, and shows an interesting timing of MacDonald's pendulum movement and the crunluath a mach played in the modern "cut" manner:




Omit 2nd time
Taorluath
Bis
Omit 2nd time
Doubling
Bis
Omit 2nd time
Birrlath
Bis
Omit 2nd time
Doubling
Bis
Omit 2nd time
Cont'd over



David Glen's second setting (ff.343-5) follows Angus MacKay's published book and is not reproduced here.

C. S. Thomason includes both MacDonald and MacKay's settings in *Ceol Mor,* but since he adds little that is distinctive stylistically, his versions are not reproduced here.

The Piobaireachd Society Collection (First Series) follows the setting of Angus MacKay in his published book, except for timing the taorluath fosgailte in the "modern" manner which had become current throughout the piping world by the end of the 19th century. It is not reproduced here.

Commentary:

This pleasant tune – a fine example of symmetrically arched phrases based on the triads ABE/BDF – is obviously cognate with "The Battle of Waternish", although it may perhaps lack "Waternish's" power. MacKay and MacDonald's scores present fascinating contrasts and might almost perhaps be considered as a set piece demonstration of the degree of piper choice once upon a time available in a tune of this type.

In his notes on this tune, Donald MacDonald says

> This fine short Piobaireachd was the favourite march of Donald Gorm of Slate, Isle of Skye, when going to the battle of Sheriffmuir. The air is supposed to be very old, but when composed is unknown.

In his "Historical and Traditional Notes on the Piobaireachds" attached to Angus MacKay's printed book James Logan says

> This Piobaireachd was composed by John MacIntyre one of the brae Rannoch family, who was then Piper to Menzies of Menzies, upon this well-fought but indecisive battle for the Stuarts, 1715. (p.8).

The tune was evidently a favourite, being entered by several pipers in the Edinburgh Competitions of the 1820s and 30s, including—in 1838—John Bruce and Donald Cameron.

John Pearson draws attention in a private communication to a Piobaireachd Society advertisement from the *Inverness Courier* of 4 June 1912, for the forthcoming competitions at Inverness and Oban, issued in the name of Captain Colin Macrae:

> The following are the piobaireachds selected for this year's competitions:
> Inverness.
> 1. The Battle of Sheriffmuir.
> 2. Kinlochmoidart's Salute
> 3. Blind Piper's Obstinacy
>
> Oban Senior Competition.
> 1. Lament for Macleod of Colbecks
> 2. Battle of Auldearn
> 3. Rout of Glenfruin
>
> Oban Junior Competition
> 1. Battle of Sheriffmuir
> 2. Lament for Macdonald of Glengarry
> 3. Lament for Catherine
>
> The music is printed by Mr Henderson 24 Renfield Street, Glasgow, and any information will be given by the secretary, Captain Colin Macrae, the Garrison, Millport. Only the settings issued by the Society are eligible for the competitions.
>
> (p.3)

The battle of Sheriffmuir was fought during the Rising of 1715 between the Jacobite forces of the Old Chevalier under the command of the Earl of Mar, and government forces under the Duke of Argyll. Military historians tend to describe it as "drawn"; but contemporaries seem to have regarded it as an absurd mutual rout, in which elements of both armies were forced to retire in confusion. As the old song says:

> There's some say that we wan,
> And some say that they wan;
> And some say that nane wan at a', man;
> But one thing I'm sure,
> That at Sheriffmuir,
> A battle there was that I saw, man;
> And we ran, and they ran
> And they ran and we ran;
> And they ran and we ran awa', man.

* * *

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