



Hail to my Country

‘Hail to my Country’ was composed by Charles Simeon Thomason (1833-1911) whose book, *Ceol Mor* is one of the greatest single contributions to the editing of *piobaireachd*. He was a pupil of Donald MacKay, Sandy MacLennan and Sandy Cameron the elder. Thomason was a grandson of J. W. Grant of Elchies on Speyside to whom Donald MacDonald (1767-1840), having virtually bankrupted himself publishing the first volume of his *Ancient Martial Music of Caledonia* (?1818/1819), sent his unpublished *piobaireachd* manuscript, “in the hopes that he, who of all his patrons had evinced the greatest interest in his work, would some day find himself in a position to perpetuate it” (“Ceol Mor Legends”, National Library of Scotland MS 3749, ff.83-4). Thomason inherited the manuscript after the death of his grandfather, and it was to form the basis of his monumental collection *Ceol Mor* published in 1900, the largest single collection ever to issue from the press.

Thomason became the first President of the Piobaireachd Society which, when it was formed in 1903, had the aim of broadening the repertoire commonly heard in competition. He was deposed in September 1904 when the Society was taken over by a powerful group of wealthy and aristocratic landowners and the aims became concentrated on developing the military role of the piper. The post-Thomason Piobaireachd Society promptly (April 1905) proscribed the playing of any settings of the music other than the those produced by the Society’s own editors, which led directly to contemporary playing styles based on the clumsy and unmusical settings of Archibald Campbell, main editor of the *Piobaireachd Society Collection* (second series) and the *Kilberry Book of Ceol Mor*.

‘Hail to my Country’ is a famous tune and was an especial favourite of R. B. Nicol of Balmoral, the twenty-fifth anniversary of whose death on 4th April 1978 falls due this year. It was also a favourite of his teacher John MacDonald (1865-1953), the 50th anniversary of whose death also falls due in 2003, and who was probably the source of Bob Nicol’s typically laconic description of Thomason: “they put him out of the Piobaireachd Society – for knowing too much.” Bob grieved greatly that his own copy of *Ceol Mor* had been stolen from the pipers’ room at Balmoral Castle and this led to its proposal as a possible title to the English publishing firm, EP of Wakefield, who re-printed the complete text and music of both the 1900 and 1905 editions in 1975.

In the summer of 1972, Bob Nicol was teaching in Brittany, under the auspices of the *Ministère de la Jeunesse et des Sports*. It was the first time a Scottish piper had taught *piobaireachd* in Brittany. Bob held classes in Rennes and Saint-Nazaire, and there was talk of his becoming official instructor to a new Breton school of *piobaireachd*. He broadcast on French radio (ORTF), gave newspaper interviews, and created a considerable stir. The pupils were impressed by his light music, but even more by “his fantastic knowledge of *piobaireachd*”. The highlight of his farewell concert at Saint-Nazaire, was “Hail to my Country”, “beautifully played” according to one who heard it (P. Mollard, “Robert B. Nicol in Brittany”, *Piping Times*, 25/1, Oct. 1972, 29-30).

Bob Nicol’s setting was more cadenced in the ground, and slightly differently graced from Thomason’s and the gist of it is given below. The General’s score leaves room for a fairly wide range of individual timings and the performer is at liberty to interpret it accordingly—as with any piece of music in a normal musical world.

This is the original setting as first published in Thomason’s *Ceol Mor* (1900, p.369):



Thomason develops the tune through to taorluath and crunluath duinte variations singling and doubling with the ground appearing again at the end of the taorluath and crunluath doublings. The even quavers in Variation 1 seem to rest on similar assumptions to those which governed G S McLennan’s published light music—i.e. they are intended to offer performer choice rather than dictate precise time values. Bob Nicol timed the tune as follows:

Hail to my Country



Musical score for 'Hail to my Country' in 6/8 time, consisting of six staves of music. The piece features a complex, rhythmic melody with many eighth and sixteenth notes, characteristic of a piper's tune. The notation includes various ornaments and articulations.

Variation 1



Musical score for 'Variation 1' in 6/8 time, consisting of five staves of music. This variation maintains the complex, rhythmic character of the original piece but with some melodic and rhythmic changes. It includes repeat signs and double bar lines.

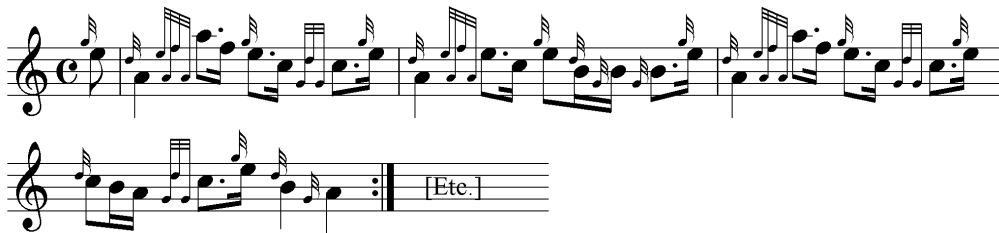
Taorluath singling



‘...and the rest is plain sailing’, as he would say.

Both Bob Nicol and Bob Brown timed the tune the same way, which is presumably how they got it from John MacDonald of Inverness. It is less ‘bare’ than Thomason’s setting, but even so, for myself, I prefer a few additional passing notes to soften the contour a bit further, perhaps as follows:

‘Hail to my Country’, Ground, line 1



Commentary

Archibald Campbell, Kilberry, had a particular dislike of this tune. Campbell’s “Introduction” to his *Kilberry Book of Ceol Mor* asserted that “the art of composing piobaireachd is dead” and that “no good player since John Ban MacKenzie [1796-1864] is known to have attempted anything serious in that line” (p.16). The popularity of “Hail to my Country” with leading contemporary players was rather inconvenient for Campbell’s theory, therefore, and he frequently tried to belittle the tune and its composer. Writing to the naturalist and piping judge Seton Gordon he stated:

Both [Willie] Ross and John MacDonald (I gather) consider Donald MacLeod to be the outstanding piper of the day... I rather wonder at a man like that bothering, or being permitted by John MacDonald to bother, with a thing like “Hail to my Country”. I know a lot about that tune... It is not Ceol Mor at all, but very inferior third rate Ceol Beag...

He [General Thomason]... told me about “Hail to my Country”. After many years absence in India he came on leave and woke up in the train on a fine summer morning at Dalwhinnie to see the beginnings of the Spey as he got towards Kingussie. He was so uplifted that the first line of the ground came into his head... Then for the second line, see (if you have it) the note in the Kilberry Book of Ceol Meadhonach about Ossian’s Lament for his Father. The second line was taken from the General’s interpretation of the second part of that tune, and he was very stubborn in condemning my version because he had put his own version into this piobaireachd.

It was very unfortunate that the General included tunes of his own composition in Ceol Mor. ... The General’s own explanation to me was that he had put in his own compositions, not

because he was proud of them, but in the hope that he would [?incite] others to compose piobd. – which showed a lack of appreciation of the situation.
 I fear neither this tune nor any more of the General’s compositions is worth anything. ...
 (Seton Gordon Papers, National Library of Scotland, General Correspondence 1940-45, 19/9/1942).

Campbell can seldom be treated as a reliable witness, however, and thoughtful readers will usually place a question mark over anything he says unless it can be confirmed from another source. ‘Ossian’s Lament for his Father’ is the opening tune in *The Kilberry Book of Ceol Meadhonach* (privately printed, 1909, 2nd edn., 1931), and it goes like this:

Cumha Fhinn (Ossian’s Lament for his Father)



The accompanying note states that:

This tune was first obtained from Major General Thomason, the author of ‘Ceol Mor’, who became acquainted with it in rather a curious way. The late Donald Mackay, piper to His Majesty the King, then Prince of Wales, once sent General Thomason some reeds wrapped up in a piece of music paper, on which a number of notes were marked without time value or bar strokes. From these General Thomason elicited the present tune, which he afterwards found published in Logan’s *Scottish Gael* under the name now given. Logan’s setting is in 3-4 time, which is not nearly so effective as General Thomason’s arrangement in 6-8. The present setting, however, differs from that of General Thomason in the second part. General Thomason has E for the crotchet at the beginning of the first and second bars, while the editors prefer to make that E a start note and accent the following F. In this view they seem to be borne out by Logan.

In Logan’s *Scottish Gael* (2nd edn., ed., Alexander Stewart, 2 vols., Inverness 1876, ii, 8) the tune appears as follows:

Cumhadh Fhinn. Ossian's Lament for his Father.

Very Slow and Expressive.



If there are obvious formative links between this and “Hail to my Country”, they are not evident to me, but the above examples may enable readers to assess for themselves Archibald Campbell’s charge that Thomason’s tune was second-hand as well as second-rate.

Later Campbell claimed that the dramatic throw from low to high A in bar one of the Ground was evidence of Thomason’s ignorance of *piobaireachd* idiom, saying that it was hitherto unknown in *ceòl mór* and was the General’s own invention. But this was not correct. The movement was used by Donald MacDonald, as Thomason, who had edited MacDonald’s papers, will have been aware. A photographic copy of these was presented to the Piobaireachd Society in 1911, and Archibald Campbell had access to this throughout his editorial work for the Society.

Although often inaccurate and based upon mere assertion, Campbell’s views came to be accorded an almost Scriptural authority within the Piobaireachd Society. Towards the end of the 20th century the following discussion took place between leading members of the Society at the Ardvasar Seminar in Skye, sponsored by the Clan Donald Trust. The subject was ‘new compositions’:

S. MacNeill: It’s a funny thing. Donald [MacLeod] was without doubt the greatest composer of light music in his time, and John MacLellan to my mind is not a good composer of light music. Yet John composes better piobaireachd than Donald did. Donald’s piobaireachds are really just slow airs with variations to them. They are not real piobaireachds.

A. Wright: Although some of them, take the Salute to the Bobs of Balmoral that’s a good one, a well constructed tune.

R. Morrison: They are kind of Hail to my Country tunes.

S. MacNeill: Hail to my Country is not a piobaireachd.

A. MacNeill: No, it’s not.

S. MacNeill: Although Bob Brown used to play it in competition...

(*Piping Times*, 41/6, March 1988, p.39-47).



“Hail to my Country” was a favourite of some of the leading players and teachers of the 20th century, John MacDonald of Inverness, R. U. Brown and R. B. Nicol of Balmoral, and Donald MacLeod. Yet the hostility of Archibald Campbell was sufficient to place it effectively beyond the pale. While Campbell offered no adequate explanation of why this lovely tune should not be considered a *pìobaireachd*, his views were casually accepted as axiomatic by senior members of the Piobaireachd Society, revealing a good deal about the arbitrary way in which notions of “authority” and “authenticity” were constructed during his lifetime and the generation that followed.

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