

## The Desperate Battle

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This tune appears in the following manuscript sources:

- **Angus MacKay**'s MS, ii, 72 (with the title "The Birds Fight or The Desperate Battle");
- **Duncan Campbell of Foss**'s MS, ff.150-152 (with the title "The Desperate Battle—Harlaw");
- **Uilleam Ross**'s MS, ff.264-266;
- **D. S. MacDonald**'s MS, ii, 77-86;
- **John MacDougall Gillies**'s MS, ff.62-3;
- **Robert Meldrum**'s MS, ff.15-18 (with the title "The Desperate Battle Perth 1396");

and in the following published sources:

- **Uilleam Ross**, *Ross's Collection*, pp.107-10;
- **Donald MacPhee**'s *Collection of Piobaireachd*, i, 14-16;
- **C. S. Thomason**'s *Ceol Mor*, pp.206-7;
- **David Glen**'s *Ancient Piobaireachd*, pp.130-1;

**Angus MacKay** sets the tune as follows:

72

*Gath n' an tun*  
*na*  
*An Gath Gaillbheach.*  
*The Birds Fight*  
*or*  
*The Desperate Battle.*

*Three times*

*Three times*

*Variation 1<sup>st</sup>*

*Doubling*

*Var. 2<sup>nd</sup>*

*Var. 3<sup>rd</sup>*

*Crann-luath*

**Duncan Campbell of Foss's** setting differs from Angus MacKay's in a number of respects. One notes the throw on F in the first bar of the ground (and in corresponding positions elsewhere), and the interesting timing of the earlier variations, including doublings of

**pipes | drums**

variation 3 and of the taorluath and crunluath, so that the tune is developed in a more symmetrical way and on a more extensive scale than in MacKay:

2

The Battle Harlow

Am Cath Gaillbreach

The Desperate Battle Harlow.

Bis

Var 1st

Bis

Var 2nd

Doubling Var 2nd

Cowan & Co.,

[Edinburgh]



20

*Var 3<sup>rd</sup>*

*Doubling Var 3<sup>rd</sup>*

*Var 4<sup>th</sup>*

*Doubling Var 4<sup>th</sup>*

*Gowar & Co.,*

*[Edinburgh.]*

The setting in **Uilleam Ross**'s manuscript is superseded by his published score (see below).

The setting in **D. S. MacDonald**'s manuscript is an outline score only, lacking gracenotes, and appears to be transcribed from Angus MacKay's version. It is not reproduced here.

## pipes | drums

**John MacDougall Gillies**'s setting seems very much to reflect that of the Cameron family by whom he was taught. He presents the tune as follows:



## pipes | drums



**Robert Meldrum's** setting adds little to the stylistic possibilities of the tune and is not reproduced here.

Of the published settings, **Uilleam Ross's** stands out as particularly well-proportioned and stylish. A note indicates that it came from Colin Cameron. Ross sets the tune as follows:



THE DESPERATE BATTLE.

19

*Bis*

*1st Var.*

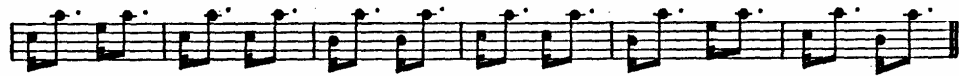
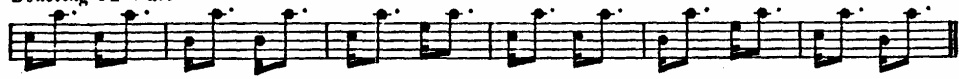
*Doubling 1st Var.*

*2nd Var.*

Copied from Colin Cameron Piper to the Earl of Fife. (In Loggans Collection.)

108

*Doubling 1st Var.*



*Tribling 2nd Var.*



*3rd Var*



*Doubling 3rd Var.*





*4<sup>th</sup> Var.*

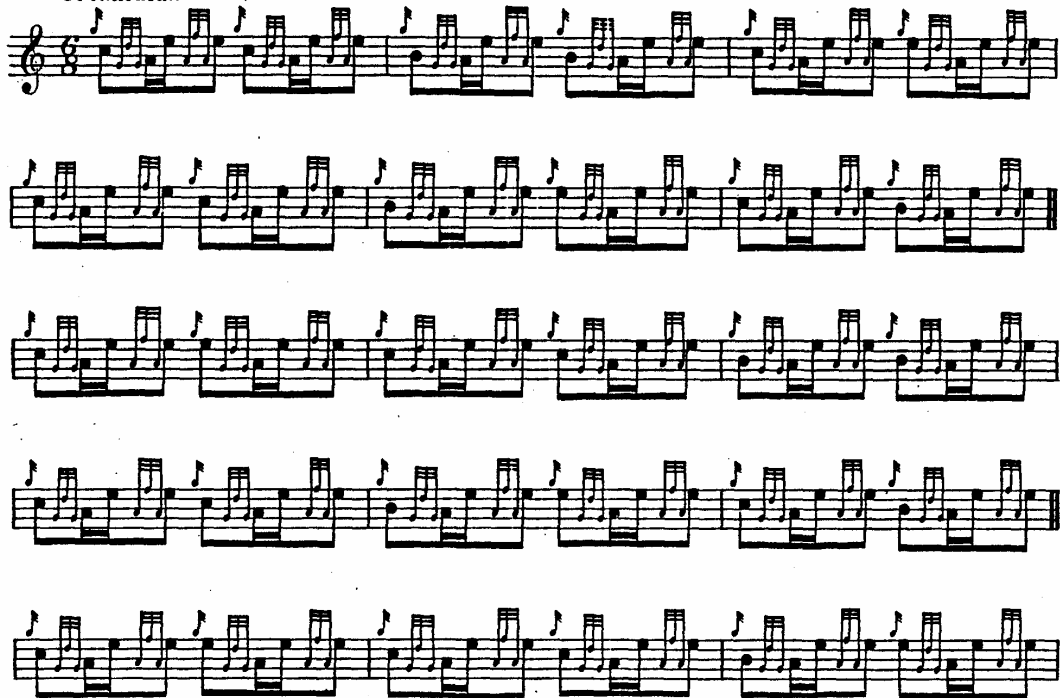


*Doubling 4<sup>th</sup> Var.*

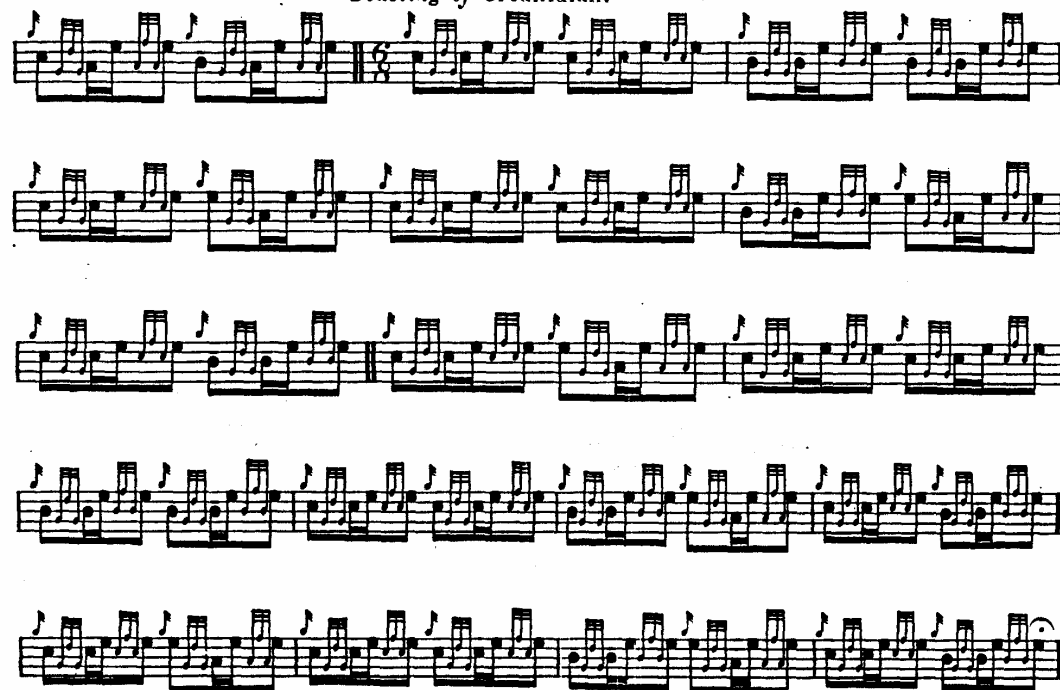


110

*Creanluidh.*



*Doubling of Creanluidh.*



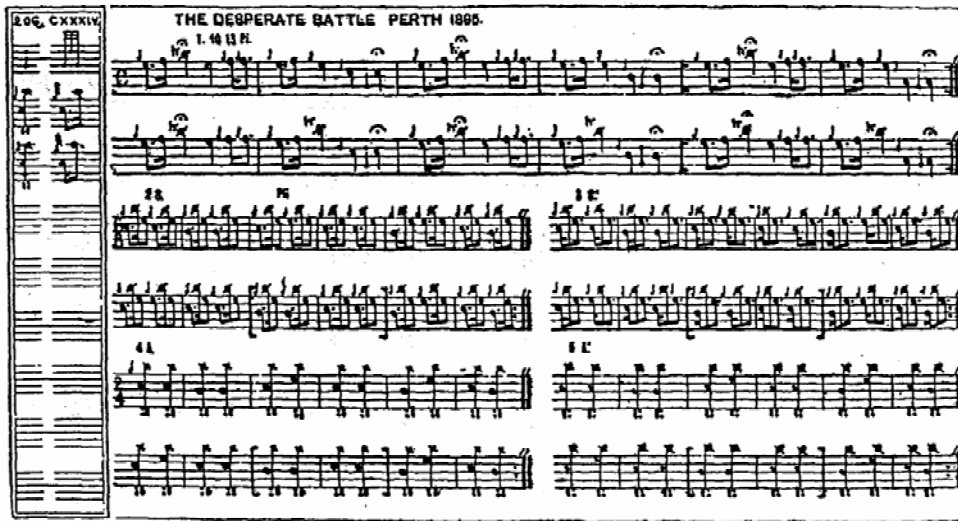
D.C.

This setting is longer and richer than the rather sketchy version in MacKay, and this was the setting substantially played by Bob Nicol, although Nicol timed the doubling of the first variation as follows, giving a more fluent effect:



**Donald MacPhee's** published score adds little to the stylistic possibilities of the tune and is not reproduced here.

**C. S. Thomason** gave as his sources Uilleam Ross's published collection and the teaching of Donald MacKay who had himself directly been taught the tune by Donald Cameron. Thomason times the piece as follows:



and so on.

In some ways one of the most interesting of the published scores is that of **David Glen**, who actually gives indications at the head of several of the variations of their emotional content and the scene they may be attempting to depict. There was a precedent for this in James Oswald's *Caledonian Pocket Companion* (15 vols., Lond., c.1747-1769) a classic eighteenth-century collection where a fiddle version of a piobaireachd had been printed with similar written guidance, but Glen's use of this device is unique in a piping source so far as I am aware:

# THE DESPERATE BATTLE OF THE BIRDS.

CÒMHRAG GHARBH NAN EUN.

Angus MacKay.

Urlar. (Before the Battle. The Challenge.)  
Moderato.

57. 

Var. 1<sup>st</sup> (After the Battle. The moans of the wounded.)  


Var. 2<sup>nd</sup> (Doubling of Var. 1<sup>st</sup>)  


Var. 3<sup>rd</sup>  


Var. 4<sup>th</sup> (Doubling of Var. 3<sup>rd</sup>)  


Var. 5<sup>th</sup>  


Doubling of Var 5<sup>th</sup>  




Var. 6<sup>th</sup> (Taor-luath.)

Doubling of Var. 6<sup>th</sup> (Taor-luath-a-mach.)

Var. 7<sup>th</sup> (Crùn-luath.)

Doubling of Var. 7<sup>th</sup> (Crùn-luath a mach.)

Repeat the Urlar.

### Commentary:

There appears to be no certainty about the historical events associated with this tune. Thomason connected it with the famous battle of the North Inch of Perth which took place in

1396, while Duncan Campbell linked it to the battle of Harlaw a couple of decades later. Others have looked to nature for the inspiration of the tune. "Fionn" says:

This tune is said to have been composed by Angus Mackay of Gairloch after having witnessed a desperate battle between certain domestic fowls. It will be observed that he has arranged the music to represent the order of battle, beginning with the "Challenge." The incident which occasioned the composition may be regarded as trivial, but it will be admitted that the composer made the most of it, and has succeeded in producing a meritorious performance ("Historic, Biographic, and Legendary Notes to the Tunes," p.15)

The Battle of the Birds – *Cath nan Eun* – forms the theme of a famous Highland folk-tale. It begins thus: "There was once a time when every creature and bird was gathering to battle. The son of the king of Teathertown said, that he would go to see the battle, and that he could bring sure word home to his father the king, who would be king of the creatures this year..." He meets a talking raven, and has magical adventures with a giant's daughter. Various versions of the story are given in J. F. Campbell's *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* (Edinr., 1860 and later edns.)

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