

The Red Hand in the MacDonalds' Arms

There are settings of this tune in the following published sources:

- **Angus MacKay**, *Collection of Ancient Piobaireachd*, pp.56-8;
- **C. S. Thomason**, *Ceol Mor*, pp.193-4;
- **David Glen**, *Collection of Ancient Piobaireachd*, pp.209-211.

There appears to be no surviving pre-twentieth century manuscript setting.

Angus MacKay sets the tune as follows:

LAMH DHEARG CHLANN DOMHNUILL.
The Red Hand in the Mac Donald's Arms.

XXIII.

Variation 1.

Variation 2.

Variation 3.



Variation 4.



Variation 5.



Doubling of Variation 5.



Variation 6.

Doubling of Variation 6.

Crun-luath.

D. C. Thema

Doubling of Crun-luath.

D. C. Thema al Fine

Angus MacKay's score – the sole earlier source for the tune– presents us with a number of problems. There seems to be a significant mis-match between the structure of the ground and variations one and two, which are framed as three lines of six bars each, and the later movements following variation three, also three lines, but of a more orthodox (and musically more pleasing) six, six, four construction. It is not unusual in *piobaireachd* for the meter to be contracted as a

means of giving a greater emotional charge to later variations as we see in several cases in the Set Tunes series. But here we appear to be looking at structural dislocation rather than natural development. MacKay's *Ancient Piobaireachd* (1838) is an edition notorious for its typographical inaccuracies, and it seems likely that the final proofing was not done by MacKay himself. It looks as if whoever saw the volume through the press had to juggle with the barring to get even a semblance of regularity in the ground, and the second variation seems to drift so awkwardly between 3/4 and 4/4 that it is difficult to see how it could be played. The tune was published in volume ten of the *Piobaireachd Society Collection (Second Series)*, its single modern appearance in print. There, the editors – James Campbell and Archibald Kenneth – suggest that the tune be reduced to an overall six, six, four pattern by dropping two bars from the third line in the ground and in variations one and two, but although they adjust MacKay's barring, they leave the ground in 4/4, and it is difficult to see how a plausible rhythmical pattern could be deduced from this score. The MP3 file accompanying the present text suggests a possible, more highly cadenced, route through the ground and first variation that might address some at least of these problems.

C.S. Thomason sets the tune as follows:

THE RED HAND IN THE MACDONALD'S ARMS

L. H. 136

2 4

8 VII. 4 P. 6 P.

The image displays a musical score for 'The Piper's Dream' (194. CXXV). It is divided into two main sections, 68 and 78, each containing multiple staves of music. The notation is in a traditional Scottish style, featuring a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a common time signature (C). The score includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and bar lines, indicating the rhythm and pitch of the music. The left section (68) and right section (78) are separated by a vertical line, and each has its own set of staves.

Thomason proposes one minor emendation, replacing MacKay's final E in the first bar of line two of the third variation with a more plausible-sounding F on analogy with a similar movement in bar thirteen of the ground, and he repeats the first line of each part throughout, but otherwise his setting is substantially that of MacKay's.

David Glen sets the tune as follows:

THE RED HAND IN THE MACDONALD S' ARMS.

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LÀMH DHEARG CHLOINN DÒMHNUILL.

Ùrlar.



Var. 1st



Var. 2nd



Var 3rd



Var 4th



Var. 5th



Doubling of Var. 5th



Var. 6th Taor - luath.



Doubling of Var. 6th Dùblachadh an Taor - luath.



Var. 7th Crùn - luath.

Repeat Urlar.



Doubling of Var. 7th Dùblachadh a' Chrùn - luath.



Repeat Urlar.

Glen seems clearly right to opt for 2/4 rather than 4/4 for the ground, making the piece a little less lumpish and square, and his is the pick of the available scores from a playing point of view, but he does little else of significance to the tune.

Commentary:

The fact that this is nowhere recorded in MS, and that neither Thomason nor Glen seriously attempted to amend it, suggests how narrowly "The Red Hand in the MacDonalds' Arms" was distributed. That it was never a favourite is further implied by the fact that not even an indefatigable antiquarian like James Logan could dig up material on it for the historical notes to Angus MacKay's published volume. Nor is there anything in Thomason's "Ceol Mor Legends" or in the *Oban Times* about the background to this tune.

Here, however, is what "Fionn" says about it in David Glen's *Collection of Ancient Piobaireachd*:

The Red Hand in the MacDonalds' Arms

Lamh Dhearg Chloinn Dòmhnuaill

How the MacDonalds got the Red Hand which is ever associated with them is well known. Somerled of the Isles had three sons - Dugald, Reginald, and Duncan - who disputed as to which of them should have the lands of Slate in Skye. At last it was decided that each of them should man his own birlinn and race for Skye from some of the other Western Isles, and that the land should belong to the son who first placed his hand on it. In this race Dugald's boat was soon left behind. Duncan's boat began to leak at the plug, which he withdrew, inserted his thumb to make it tight, and urging his men was on the point of winning. When Reginald saw this, he placed his left hand on the gunwale of his own boat, severed it at the wrist with a blow from the claymore in his right, threw it ashore, and as the red hand was the first to touch the land he got himself declared winner. ("Historic, Biographic, and Legendary Notes," p.19).

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