

Dance to the Piper: The Highland Bagpipe in Nova Scotia.

Ian Hayes

Volume 72, 2010

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/mcr72br03>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

National Museums of Canada

ISSN

1718-1259 (imprimé)

1927-9264 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Hayes, I. (2010). Compte rendu de [*Dance to the Piper: The Highland Bagpipe in Nova Scotia.*]. *Material Culture Review*, 72, 71–72.

IAN HAYES

Review of

Shears, Barry. 2008. *Dance to the Piper: The Highland Bagpipe in Nova Scotia*. Sydney, NS: Cape Breton University Press.

Pp. 200, ISBN: 978-1-897009-33-8, \$23.95.

Dance to the Piper takes a chronological look at the culture of the Highland bagpipes and tracks how the instrument came from pre-Clearance Highland Scotland to become entrenched in contemporary Nova Scotia society. As such, author Barry Shears explores the bagpipes in the early Gaelic culture of Nova Scotia, as well as their changing role in the military. Included with the book is an excellent CD that features recordings of pipers ranging from the 1920s to 2007. These recordings are a welcome addition, and help demonstrate the piping styles discussed throughout the book. In addition to these pipers, the CD also includes recordings of several fiddlers (for stylistic comparison), as well as an excerpt from one of Shears' ethnographic interviews. I appreciate the CD because even the most apt description of a musical performance is no replacement for hearing the music for oneself. I would have preferred, however, a more detailed discussion of the recordings—the appendix devoted to the CD is short and focuses on biographical summaries of the pipers found on the recording.

The book is divided into six main chapters, each corresponding to a particular historical period. Shears begins by contextualizing the Highland bagpipes in Scotland, then discusses Clearance-era immigration and the subsequent beginnings of piping in Nova Scotia (1773-1890). In the following chapters, Shears addresses Nova Scotia's piping transition to the 20th century (1895-1930), piping in the army and the rest of the 1900s, concluding in 1997 with the death of Cape Breton traditional piper, Alex Curry. Shears primarily uses a historical approach, relying on a mix of archival and ethnographic sources. A significant amount of the book is devoted to biographical sketches of historically significant pipers and their lineage.

The research that Shears did in regard to archival sources is impressive, particularly in relation to images; he was able to find photographs of important pipers from as far back as the late 1800s. Moreover, several photos of immigrant bagpipers and chanters are included, which are particularly valuable to those interested in material culture. By cross-referencing newspapers, personal interviews

and land grant applications, Shears was able to compile extensive lists of early immigrant pipers, along with their second, third and fourth generation counterparts, bagpipe makers and their locations in Nova Scotia (Appendices A-C). Although the emphasis on biographical and genealogical information about various pipers may seem heavy-handed at times, it is clearly indicative of the value placed on such topics by Shears' informants.

In addition to these strengths, Shears shines in his ability to clearly explain the history of Highland culture and its romanticized depictions by English and Lowland nobility, a topic frequently wrought with confusion and ambiguity. He also differentiates between traditional Gaelic and military piping styles, another area that is rarely addressed. More than these issues, however, I applaud Shears for his well-balanced and reasonable depiction of the Highland Clearances—a point in history that is too often explained in broad generalizations of poor peasants being forced off their land by greedy landlords. This is a vast oversimplification of events, and he details the variety of economic and colonial factors contributing to emigration. He includes a discussion of the middle class in the Highland Clearances and, by extension, the immigration of middle-class pipers to Nova Scotia. In analyzing early immigrant groups, the middle class tends to be overlooked, particularly in Nova Scotian Gaelic culture.

The book falls short in cultural analysis, however; while historical facts have been well-documented, Shears relies on blunt, unsupported assertions in relation to some aspects of Gaelic culture and cultural change in Nova Scotia. For example, throughout the book, the author refers to the inherent relationship between the Gaelic language and traditional, Gaelic piping. Although I do not contend that such a relationship does not or has not existed, Shears offers little support for this claim. He explains that the Gaelic language and traditional piping were found in the same immigrant groups, that pipe melodies were often learned from Gaelic songs and that both the language and music experienced a sharp decline at the same time. While

such evidence shows a circumstantial correlation between the two, it fails to demonstrate any kind of reliable, causal relationship. The relationship between the Gaelic language and music has been discussed extensively by scholars like John Shaw (1993), Glenn Graham (2006) and Heather Sparling (2003).

Shears' argument that Gaelic culture in Cape Breton and rural Nova Scotia has been retained perfectly intact due to the culture's physical isolation and lack of external influences, a point reiterated every few pages, is also of concern. While it may be true that certain outside influences were limited prior to the 1880s, it is insufficient to assume that a culture can only experience change through the influence of outside sources. To frame a culture as static and incapable of internal change positions the group as timeless, and neglects the possibility of agency or personal creativity. This is an issue that has been discussed at length in anthropological texts. Scholars like Franz Boas (2008/1911) have criticized such assumptions, challenging notions of timelessness and primitivism that have their roots in

colonial Eurocentrism. Furthermore, Shears readily acknowledges the lack of reliable sources from the 19th century that indicate specifics of bagpipe performance practice, negating any possibility of supporting or disproving his claim of a period of cultural stasis and limiting such discussion to speculation.

Overall, I found *Dance to the Piper* to be a well-researched and informative book documenting the social history surrounding the bagpipes and their introduction into Nova Scotian culture. While it seems to be aimed primarily at a popular audience, it is also useful to scholars due to its grounding in archival materials and its ability to attend to conflated representations of the Highland bagpipes in popular culture over the years. Shortcomings in regard to cultural analysis notwithstanding, I recommend it as an excellent source for photographs, audio recordings and genealogical information, all of which are augmented by ethnographic research. It is clear that Shears is passionate about the subject matter and has a deep understanding of the Highland bagpipes and their history.

References

Boas, Franz. 2008/1911. *The Mind of Primitive Man*. New York: Macritchie Press.

Graham, Glenn. 2006. *The Cape Breton Fiddle: Making and Maintaining Tradition*. Sydney, NS: Cape Breton University Press.

Shaw, John. 1992. Language, Music and Local Aesthetics: Views from Gaeldom and Beyond. *Scottish Language* 11: 37-64.

Sparling, Heather. 2003. Music is Language and Language is Music: Language Attitudes and Musical Choices in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. *Ethnologies* 25 (2): 145-71.

YVES LABERGE

Compte rendu de

Patrick Imbert (dir.). 2007. *Les jardins des Amériques : éden, home et maison. Le Canada et les Amériques*. Ottawa : Université d'Ottawa.

246 pp.

Cet ouvrage interdisciplinaire, publié en français par la Chaire de recherche « Canada : enjeux sociaux et culturels dans une société du savoir », regroupe sept textes inédits. Ces recherches ne portent évidemment pas sur le jardinage, mais bien sur les représentations symboliques des lieux et des jardins comme révélateurs d'appartenance, de mémoire et d'identité collective.

En guise d'ouverture, le professeur Patrick Imbert montre comment l'étude et la compréhension du paysage canadien à travers diverses média-

tions (comme les écrits, littéraires ou autres) et par le truchement de la création artistique (surtout par les œuvres picturales) peuvent participer, au-delà de leur évidente dimension esthétique, à une véritable construction sociale de l'identité collective, voire de l'État nation (44). Parmi les exemples cités, pensons à *La Flore laurentienne* (1935) du frère Marie-Victorin ou encore aux toiles du Groupe des Sept. L'intérêt de ce livre résulte d'une étude attentive de la dimension esthétique qui dépasse une simple affirmation identitaire et qui n'est pas exclusive