

The Northumberland Small Pipes in Ontario: A General Field Survey Concerning Their Popularity and Dispersal

Gordon Philips

Volume 2, Number 1-2, 1980

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081030ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081030ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this note

Philips, G. (1980). The Northumberland Small Pipes in Ontario: A General Field Survey Concerning Their Popularity and Dispersal. *Ethnologies*, 2(1-2), 54–56. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081030ar>

Article abstract

Cette note de recherche traite de la popularité et de la dispersion des pipeaux du Northumberland anglais en Ontario. Une enquête menée en 1979-1980 révéla que, malgré le fait qu'il existait neuf jeux de pipeaux la province, il ne restait plus de communauté de joueurs de pipeau, principalement à cause de la dispersion géographique. En conséquence, l'absence dans le territoire d'une tradition orale liée à l'usage des pipeaux constituait une raison majeure qui empêcha les joueurs inexpérimentés de perpétuer l'usage de leurs pipeaux.

Notes

The Northumberland Small Pipes in Ontario: A General Field Survey Concerning Their Popularity and Dispersal

GORDON PHILLIPS

Field work I undertook relating to the Northumberland small pipes in Ontario was to some extent motivated by previous research carried out in rural Northumberland, England, in the spring of 1979. It was apparent from this study that, although the small pipes are not a common instrument, their popularity has increased greatly over the past twenty years. Indeed, the esoteric nature of this relatively unknown folk instrument is emphasized by the fact that during the 1940s perhaps no more than a handful of pipers were active in Northumberland. However, contact with a small pipe maker whilst in Northumberland indicated to me that many sets of pipes are being made for export, and that, although they are being distributed world wide, many sets are coming to North America.

Having gained some knowledge in my initial field research regarding the use and popularity of this instrument in Northumberland, it seemed possible that a survey in a specific region of North America would shed some light on the ease of migration of these pipes. Comparison of such factors as popularity, styles of playing, and choice of literature would result from this type of inquiry. Further, considering the delicate nature of reeds for the small pipes, and considering the harsh climactic extremes on this continent, ease of migration might be particularly dependent upon climactic conditions.

One of the main problems encountered in the assimilation of data for this project was simply the location of informants. In Northumberland, dispersal and location were not a problem, considering that most pipers were in contact with each other. Indeed, by virtue of the historical traditions and concentrated geographic location of this folk community,

collecting was made relatively easy. This is not the case in Canada where no such folk group or Northumbrian community exists. For example, a study of the popularity of Macedonian bagpipes in Ontario would at least limit the location to Toronto, which contains a thriving community of many thousands of Macedonians to sample from. I made contact with small pipe players either through the Northumbrian Pipers' Society or from sales records of the pipe makers themselves. My research showed only nine sets of pipes in Ontario, and with very wide geographic dispersal. I did the collecting through a questionnaire which, considering the specific nature of this survey together with problems of location, seemed adequate. However, in the course of the study I was able to visit two of the informants personally, and concluded that information was obtained from these meetings which would not have been revealed by the questionnaire alone.

From the results of this inquiry certain problems regarding upkeep and maintenance of the small pipes became apparent, and these problems appeared to be a direct result of the isolation and geographic dispersal of the pipers themselves. I could only find two pipers who had instruments in working order, a fact which appeared to result from the experience and knowledge required to fit and tune the reeds of the instrument. It is well known that bagpipes in general require a great deal of effort and skill to keep them in good working order, particularly with regard to the chanter reed. Their decline over the past few hundred years, and their consequent replacement by concertina and accordion-type instruments, suggests a movement towards simplicity in terms of maintenance as well as playing technique. In Northumberland the manufacture and fitting of the chanter reed for these pipes is certainly considered to be a specialized art, and much knowledge is required to fit a reed so that the chanter will 'speak' in tune over its whole range. As there are no known reed or pipe makers in Ontario, the inexperienced or new players are at a distinct disadvantage.

Questions regarding the choice of small pipe literature revealed that there is no functioning oral tradition; all of the informants either copied tunes from albums or from printed tune books. However, there was a tendency to play the traditional Northumbrian tunes, the availability of which has been greatly enhanced by printed tune books. These books have been made available by the Northumbrian Pipers' Society and to some extent by individual pipers.

I have stressed in this survey the observation of an extreme need for knowledge and tuition in terms of pipe and reed maintenance. This is obviously the area where oral tradition is still in great demand. In fact, from the study conducted in Northumberland, it was apparent that piping was kept alive through oral tradition. The lack of communication in

Ontario, and hence the lack of oral tradition, appears to be a major factor preventing inexperienced pipers from playing their pipes. The student-teacher relationship must play a very important part in helping such difficult instruments to hold their place in a folk culture. For many non-professional folk musicians, one of the few rewards in playing is to be able to enjoy the sound of a favourite tune, and a badly reeded bagpipe is certainly no fun at all.

From the results of this survey, and with particular regard to the lack of working small pipes, some conclusions can be drawn concerning the functioning of oral tradition within a folk group. Although the Northumberland small pipes are primarily a solo instrument, it is through a group, and consequently the oral tradition of that group, that the music continues to be manifest. In Northumberland, pipers get together to play, as well as to exchange ideas and technical knowledge; in short they form a folk group. The literature, styles of playing, and knowledge form the basis of the folklore in that society. Such is clearly not the case in Ontario with regard to the small pipes, because the group, and consequently the collective knowledge, does not exist. The overall impression I received from this survey was that these pipers wanted to get together, but for reasons of location could not. There was a sense that they would all be playing a lot more and indeed would feel the need to play a lot more if such a community existed. In general it seems that there is a collective energy generated within a cultural group, which is the driving force for its existence or continuation. Certainly with regard to the Northumberland small pipes in Ontario, and from contact with other pipers in North America, there appears to be no such collective or community on this continent.

York University
Downsview, Ontario

Résumé

Cette note de recherche traite de la popularité et de la dispersion des pipeaux du Northumberland anglais en Ontario. Une enquête menée en 1979-1980 révéla que, malgré le fait qu'il existait neuf jeux de pipeaux la province, il ne restait plus de communauté de joueurs de pipeau, principalement à cause de la dispersion géographique. En conséquence, l'absence dans le territoire d'une tradition orale liée à l'usage des pipeaux constituait une raison majeure qui empêcha les joueurs inexpérimentés de perpétuer l'usage de leurs pipeaux.