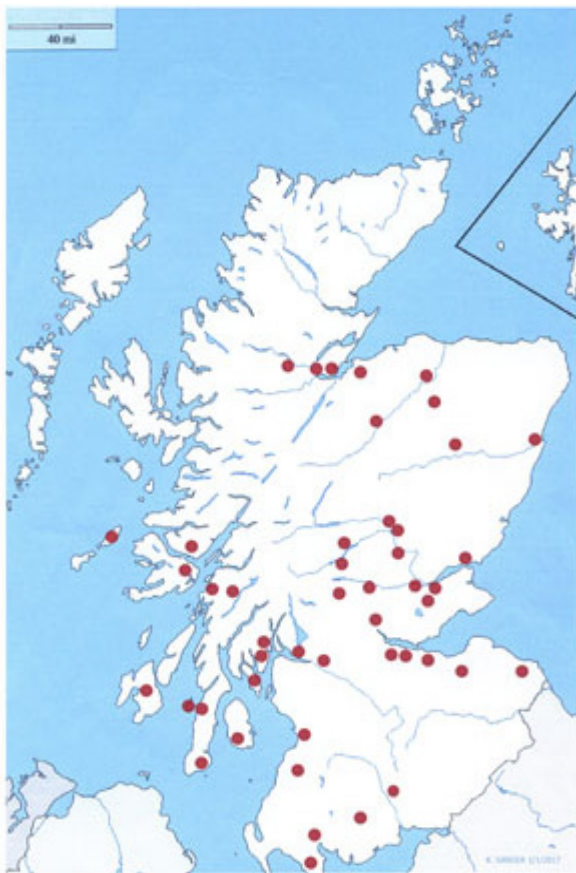


Mapping the Clarsach in Scotland ¹

by Keith Sanger

The position of the Clarsach in the musical history of Scotland and Ireland has for a long time rested more on supposition rather than firmly established facts. To a certain extent this is understandable given the usual historical references which are most often repeated but with little real critical analysis. The name 'Clarsach' is Gaelic, therefore it is automatically connected to the Gaelic speaking areas of Scotland, and by proxy to Ireland. In both countries it has assumed a status of the 'Ancient National Instrument', but 'nations' are and were constantly evolving entities. Therefore what is intended here is to examine the background and locations of the 'Clarsach' in Scotland over time and geography.



When over forty–five years ago now, I first started taking an interest in the history of the harp in Scotland the most recent work available on that subject was the chapter on the harp in Francis Collinson's *Traditional and National Music of Scotland* published in 1966. At the time it was and continued to be considered, an authoritative piece of work, especially when quoted by other authors. But when attempting to use it as a basis for further research a number of problems became evident. It quickly became apparent that there was a very large omission in the sources used in that chapter as there is no mention of, or reference to, R B Armstrong's 1904 publication on the Irish and Highland Harps.

This was surprising as it is not particularly hard to find with copies held by the National Library of Scotland, the Edinburgh Central Library Music Department and Collinson's own institution, the Edinburgh University Library. There was also a serious problem with an over reliance on one source he did use, the Angus Fraser manuscript, compounded when using it to demonstrate a connection between harp music and pipe music by ignoring Fraser's own statement regarding the background to *Craobh nan Teud* or 'Lament for the Harp Tree' which explained that Fraser had decided to change the title of the music.

Although Armstrong's work was a more careful and extensive publication than Collinson's and made considerable use of extracts from the Scottish Treasurers Accounts of payments to harpers; it also as the title 'Highland Harps' indicates, devoted far more attention to the 'clarsach'. Both publications leave the reader with the impression that although two different harps, one strung with gut and the other with wire were used in Scotland there was a clear division between the Lowland users of the gut strung harp and the Highland or Gaelic use of the wirestrung harp or Clarsach.

This conventional wisdom had been re-enforced by the revival of the 'Clarsach', firstly in its original wire strung form when in 1894 Lord Archibald Campbell instigated a Clarsach competition at the newly inaugurated Gaelic Mods and then with the second attempt at a revival with the formation of the Clarsach Society in 1932. Despite the small harps used by the Clarsach Society being of modern design with gut strings, they were called clarsachs and the society maintained a close relationship with *An Comunn Gaidhealach* while the clarsach was always described as the 'Highland Instrument'.

This was further emphasised when in 1969 a series of booklets on Highland Music were published by *An Comunn Gaidhealach* and included one called *The Clarsach* written by Sir Philip Christison, who was the president of the Clarsach Society. When in 1992 the book *Tree of Strings* was published greater clarity was drawn between the two harps historically used in Scotland with chapters on each instrument, but overall it still followed conventional wisdom. That there was a gut strung harp used by the Lowlanders and a wire strung 'highland harp' which had some close affinity with the harp used in Ireland. In fact by devoting distinct chapters to each harp it may have further reinforced the idea of a clear cut dividing line between the 'Highland' and 'Lowland' use of both harps.

Tree of Strings was though in reality a work in progress and reflected the research and views formed up to around 1990. In fact as the police might say, there were a number of lines of inquiry still being followed and it is now possible to take a completely fresh view of the place of the 'Clarsach' in Scotland in terms of its geographical spread and connections. A review which has been greatly helped by a number of other revisionist studies of the Bardic connections between the Gaelic worlds of Scotland and Ireland along with some parallel research on the place of the bagpipe in Scotland.

The names used for the wirestrung harp in the earliest contemporary sources continues to present some problems. In Scottish Gaelic *Cruit* had given way to *Clarsach* by the 14th C, and the latter was then conveniently for identification purposes also absorbed into Scots. However when viewed through the eyes of other contemporary written sources the Latin terms *Cithara* and *Lyre* were used along with the ubiquitous *Harp*. Indeed as late as 1706 in the Registers of Retours, which at that time were still kept in Latin, 'Lyrica' was used to describe the Perthshire Harper Alexander Menzies.²

Identifying the early players of the wirestrung harp subsequently known as a 'Clarsach' therefore involves a degree of speculation. Perhaps the first occasion for which it can be argued that the harper would probably have been playing a wirestrung harp was the inauguration of Alexander III at Scone in 1249. From the accounts of that occasion it is clear that the 'King's Poet', or *ollamh rig* recited the new King's pedigree in Gaelic as part of the ceremony. In the depiction of the event recorded on the contemporary seal of Scone Abbey, the poet can be seen 'reading' from a vertically held scroll with a harper tucked away just behind him.

In reality as the presence of the harper would support, the poet would have been chanting the pedigree to the harps accompaniment in a similar fashion to how his poems were normally 'declaimed'. All the participants

other than the harper have been named so although his presence on the seal demonstrates he was an essential element to the poet's recitation, it was, as ever the musician's lot to get lost in the background. However although small it is clear that the harper is kneeling down and seems to have the small harp tucked into his left shoulder and given the fact that he was supporting a performance in Gaelic suggests that his harp was probably wire rather than gut strung.³

Given that such posts were hereditary, a harper called Elias, the next holder of the office of 'Royal Harper', who had accompanied Alexander III on a visit to London in 1278 was probably the holder of what had been his forebears lands which when restored to the harper by the English authorities in 1296 were at what became known as the modern Balvaird. These lands straddled the border between Perthshire and Fife, some ten miles east of Scone and not far from Strathmiglo in Fife.⁴

Another harper who was probably playing a wire strung instrument appears during that same period in the south west of Scotland. In 1346 David II granted a charter to 'Patrick, son of the late Michael 'Harper' of Carrick, (*Patricio filio quondam Michaelis Cithariste de Carryk*), of the lands of Dalelachane, which had belonged to Andrew, son and heir of the said late Michael and brother of the said Patrick. These lands had been resigned by the said Andrew before certain nobles of the kingdom at Ayr on the 23 May 1344.⁵

Patrick was clearly the younger son of Michael 'Harper' of Carrick, but from other charters it is possible to establish several generations of that family while also strengthening the probability that 'Michael' was using a wirestrung harp. A Patrick McWhirter first comes into view as an adult in 1261 when the Bishop of Glasgow granted him the lands of 'Steindal' in the forest of Dalquhairn, Dumfriesshire for a term of five years at twenty merks yearly. A similar five year bond for the lands of Kirkcudbright was also granted for a payment of twelve merks a year. The yearly payments were to be made in two parts, one half to be paid within a week of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, (15 August), and the other half within a week of St Andrews Day, (30 November).⁶

Clearly this Patrick 'McWhirter', or *MacChruiter* could not have still been alive in 1344 so would have most likely been the father or a brother of Michael '*Cithariste de Carryk*'. Furthermore the ecclesiastical connection, especially the St Andrews Day payment date might account for the two saints names of Andrew and Michael subsequently being used by the family. It is also clear from another charter of 1385 when 'Duncan M'Churterr son and heir of the late Patrick M'Churterr' sold the whole lands of Dalelachane to Sir Thomas Kennedy, Lord of Dalmorton for twelve cows with their calves,⁷ that the family 'name' was MacChruiter and that the Latin term Cithariste was being equated with *Cruit* or harp. Hence by association that the said 'Cruit' was more likely to have been strung with wire than gut.

Although by this period there are a number of early references to harpers in Scotland, or in some cases Scottish harpers in England the information supplied by these does not provide sufficient detail to determine the harpers background or the nature of the harp. Nor is it helped by many of the sources in which they occur being written in Latin, the common administrative language of the time. However, by the fifteenth century this had changed as increasing numbers of the Scottish records were written in 'Scots' and named harpers identified by the newer Gaelic name for the wirestrung harp of 'Clairseach' start to appear.

However, the earliest documents in which the harper has been recorded using the Gaelic name for the wirestrung harp were written in Latin where he was noted as a witness to a payment of forty-eight merks in January 1434-35. The money was a payment by Sir John Scrymgeour, Constable of Dundee to a John Makane of Kilmun for the lands of Kilmun. The document was signed in Dundee so the harper '*Eugenio Klerscharch*' must also have been in Dundee and was probably a witness from the side of John Makane.

Why the Constable wanted Kilmun, which is on the north side of the Holy Loch and about three miles from Dunoon is unclear, but as the Scrymgeour's also owned Glassary in mid Argyle that may have be the connection.⁸

This also seems to be only record of 'John Makane of Kilmun' but as eight merks from the payment was to be passed onto John Makane's uncle 'Celestine', a name which crops up among the Lamont family who originally held most of Cowal, then they may have been a branch of the Lamont's. If that was the case then the harper's forename of 'Eugenio' is probably significant as both a 'Eugen the clerk' and a 'Eugen the poet' appear among the Lamont papers circa 1460 and may all be members of the professional family of 'MacEwen's' who went on to later serve the Campbell's as poets.

The next appearance of a harper with that descriptor occurs just a few years later in the Exchequer Rolls and this time in the North East of Scotland. In 1438 the rolls record that a 'Duncanum Clarscheouch' had been granted 'Westercloveth in Strathdon'. The modern form of the place-name is Westerclova and it lies about two miles to the north and a little west of the ruins of Kildrummy Castle which was one of the major centres of the Earldom of Mar. This provides a clue to the harpers likely background as Alexander Stewart Earl of Mar had died in 1435 and the Earldom had reverted to the crown. However, the 'crown' at that point was a child who was not in any position to administer the estate, so this was likely to have been a decision by Adam Falconer the Chamberlain of Mar to accommodate the former harper to the Earl of Mar.⁹

At roughly the same period another clarsach player called *Giolla Criost Brùilingeach* appears from a completely Gaelic source. Two poems by him addressed to an Irish patron are included in the *Book of the Dean of Lismore*. In the first poem addressed to Tomaltach Mac Diarmada of Moylurg in Connacht, he includes a request for a *Clàirseach* as payment, while the second poem indicates he received one.¹⁰ The 'poet' is described by the writer of the manuscript as 'Bard in Leymm' and from that it has been argued that he came from a hereditary family of harpers named *Mac an Bhreatnaich* (or Galbraith), who were associated with Leim in the island of Gigha which lies just to the west of North Kintyre.¹¹

More recently the question has been raised whether a mere 'harper' would have the required training to compose in the strict metres used by *Giolla Chriost*, while it was quite possible that a *file*, part of whose training was in music should have asked for a harp in payment of his work. It was also noted that there was evidence that in Ireland at least, poetic addresses to a chief by anyone who had not achieved the degree of *ollamh* were unacceptable.¹² It is though quite possible that this is in fact a prime example of how someone like *Giolla Chriost* who clearly had a foot in Ireland as well as Scotland was viewed differently from each direction.

That there were differences between the Gaelic worlds of Scotland and Ireland which included the professional classes has been growing in general acceptance. The point has been made that the more formal structure involving the *file* in Ireland may have only extended to Scotland when practised by poetic families directly connected to Ireland like the *MacMhuirichs* and *O'Muirgheasáins*. Furthermore it is argued that apart from those individuals in Scotland the role of *Bard*, which had no direct Irish equivalent, encompassed that function.

In the case of *Giolla Chriost* when viewed through the eyes of the Scottish compiler of the Dean's Book, he clearly met that roll of a Bard. However to have received acceptance by his hosts in Ireland he must have also received sufficient training in the poetic arts to meet their expectations. It is then perhaps more than a coincidence that *Giolla Chriost's* home on Gigha was not far from the Kintyre lands of the *MacMhuirich* poets. Nor that another contemporary and possible relative, a *Lachlann Mac an Bhreatnaich* who was the

subject of another poem in the Book a satire, but in which reference was made to the subject being “sweet voiced”, possibly indicating that elusive functionary a ‘*reacaire*’ or ‘singer’ of the poems.¹³

As over the course of that century the records become more prolific, they show that from circa 1470 a family also called *MacBhreatnaich* served for some three generations as harpers to the royal court. Although the references to them, first a Martin (fl 1471 x 1498) followed by John (fl 1498 x 1513) and Rolland (fl 1505 x 1513), are spread over a number of different records kept in Latin and Scots, from the latter it is clear that they were players of the clarsach. Furthermore they had been granted the land holding of Knockan and Clutag near Wigtown in Galloway. Like many of those in the service of the Crown they seem to have been casualties of Flodden in 1513, at least they disappear from record at that point. However since they had held lands in Galloway it may be significant that a rare but short lived example of Clarsach forming a surname occurs in that area when in 1529 an *Andro M’Clairschar* was among a number of people named in a respite issued at Dumfries.

After the disaster at Flodden in 1513 with many of the previous courtiers dead and the new king just a child, court life was considerably reduced until he reached adulthood; by which time his musical tastes had come under influences from France. However from the surviving pre 1513 Scottish Records it is possible to identify backgrounds of many of the musicians described as players of the clarsach. Some only appear in the court records so were either permanently attached to the court or were local to the court, usually Edinburgh, Stirling or Linlithgow. A number though are identified by the harpers own patron which usefully enables an idea to be gained of some of those who employed *clarsairs* as compared to harpers on the gut strung harp.

Those patrons who retained their own *clarsairs* were the Earl of Argyle, MacLean (presumably of Duart), and the Prior of Whitehorn. In addition isolated payments were made to *clarsairs* at Perth, Stirling, Dumbarton, Balquidder, Inchmahome, Ayr, Glenluce, Lochmaden and Wigtown representing quite a wide geographical spread. To fill in the gaps to try and get a more complete picture two references to actual instruments can also be added to the list. In 1490 ‘*ane clareshaw*’ was the subject of a legal case over ownership between Ninian Ballantyne of Kames on the Island of Bute and his mother, Agnes MacDonald (of the Isles), who by that time was remarried to John Lamont of Lamont. For the second reference we travel right across Scotland to Lindores Abbey, close to the south side of the Firth of Tay in the North of Fife. An inventory of the contents of the Abbey made in 1530 included ‘*ane Clairshew*’ as well as a chess set. As the earliest reference to the distillation of ‘*Aqua vitae*’ (whisky), in Scotland is also credited to the Abbey in 1494, it would appear that the monks did not lack for entertainment.

Looking further afield than the Treasurer’s Records to other reference material, while adding to the number of known *clarsairs* it also leads to a greater need to discuss their background and context. Apart from the Royal Court there was a separate source of patronage within the Gaelic world of the Lords of the Isles. This only comes into view in the official records after the forfeiture of John MacDonald, the last Lord of the Isles circa 1492/93.¹⁴ As the lands formerly held by the Lordship were now brought under direct control of the Crown the Exchequer Rentals open a window on the patronage of its professional classes by the Lordship. The centre of the Lordship was based at Finlaggan on Islay but the poets and harpers actually held land in Kintyre.

The Exchequer Rolls were kept in Latin so when the family of harpers first appear in 1505 holding the four merkland based on Brunerican at the south end of Kintyre, the holder was described as ‘*Muriach McMaschenach citheriste*’. Subsequently, after the former MacDonald lands of Kintyre were granted by the Crown to the Earl of Argyle and so can be traced in the Argyle Rentals where they are described as ‘harpers’.¹⁵ Therefore while they are not actually described in any of the contemporary surviving records as

'*Clarsairs*', it is reasonably safe to assume they were. Indeed as they would have performed for the Lords of the Isles at Finlaggan where excavations have found some tuning pins for wirestrung harps, albeit of a slightly earlier period, that assumption is strengthened.

A further source of *clarsairs* from the first half of the sixteenth century comes from the manuscript known as the *Book of the Dean of Lismore*, compiled between 1512 to 1542. The relevant section comprises two pages of name lists with some duplication between them. Four of the names were clearly noted as musicians while some of the others can also be shown to be harpers from other contemporary sources. It has been suggested that they may all be harpers but that may be stretching the evidence a little too far. The lists include '*Mcoschennak a Brounerre*' clearly as has been pointed out, the contemporary member of the family noted in the Exchequer Rolls as the harper.¹⁶ However the list also includes a number of the wider members of that family and there is no good reason to think that they were all harpers.

Of those specifically noted as musicians two were harpers. '*Thomas clarsair MacDhughail*' who was presumably employed by the MacDougals of Lorne who also patronised the MacEwen poets around the same time. The second harper was named as '*Robert clarsair Loyd [Lude]*' but as these name lists are thought to be towards the later part of the manuscripts compilation dates, Lude was by then possessed by the Ogilvy's of Inchmartine. Therefore this may be the harper called Robert Stewart who witnessed an instrument of sasine to some lands in Strathardle in 1559.¹⁷ For anybody moving between Lude and Inchmartine which is close to the River Tay, traveling via Strathardle would have been the simplest route.

The remaining two clearly identified musicians were a piper called '*MacGhille Dhuidh*' and a player of the Tiompan called '*Conchubhair O'hAngluinn*'. This is the only known tiompan player noted from a Scottish source and it may be significant that he was Irish. In Ireland the tiompan continued to be used as an alternative accompaniment to the delivery of 'Bardic' verse and this performer may have been working in connection with another Irishman in the list, a '*Lachlann Mac an Bhaird*'; whose name indicates he was a member of that Irish family of poets and was therefore more likely to have been a poet rather than a *clarsair*.

While the assumption that the rest of the names were members of the groups of entertainers known collectively as '*Cliar Sheanchain*' when they travelled on 'circuit' together, is probably correct, only one further name in the list can confidently be claimed as a harper. Named as '*Brane Mc a vicar*' he can probably be identified with a '*Brayne M'Vicar cytharista*' to the Earl of Argyle who witnessed a deed in 1549.¹⁸ Although '*cytharista*' could be translated as a player of either the wirestrung clarsach or a gut strung harp, a descendent writing in 1802 stated that he had seen the remains of a clarsach at his grandfather's house and whether that was indeed the earlier clarsach, a wirestrung instrument is more likely in that context.¹⁹

Lacking any further independent corroboration for the remaining names in the lists means that there is a limit to how far they can be used for mapping the geographic distribution of harpers. It is a reasonable assumption that there may be more *clarsairs* among them but, as those clearly identified in the lists as musicians included a player of the tiompan as well as a piper, then it is equally likely that more players of those instruments may also be present. Furthermore a number of females are also named but rather than instrumentalists they were more likely to be some of the "women singers" as they are noted in some of the surviving contemporary household accounts.²⁰

Moving on to the second half of the sixteenth century the Treasurers Accounts for that period do show at least two *clarsairs* in attendance at the Royal Court. The first was a Robert Galbraith, who from his name may have been a descendent of the earlier *MacBhreatnaich* family of *clarsairs*. He appears to have been permanently attached to the court appearing in the accounts on a number of occasions from 1574. When

he first appears on being fitted for his apparel he was described as a '*clairshear*', but there after along with another man (who may have played a gut harp), they are described simply as musicians.²¹ This less specific description may have been a reflection of the trend to describing the four violers just as 'the King's musicians'. The growing influence of the violers along with changing musical tastes as the young King James VI came into his own probably explains why the *clairsair* disappears from court shortly after before subsequently re-appearing as '*Robert Calbrathe ye clarscher*' in the accounts of the Earl of Home in 1597.²² At that point the harper was at Mains of Auldambus, (Old Cambus), which lies between Cockburnspath and Coldingham in the Eastern Borders.

The second reference to a clairsair in the Treasurers Accounts appears after Robert Galbraith seems to have left the Royal Court, when in August 1581 a payment was made to a '*william mckgegane clerschoman*' of £10 [Scots].²³ The name MacEgan, (*Mac Aodhagáin*) suggests that this harper was a member of an Irish family who normally held the office of *Brehon* but as was often the case with members of professional families had switched to a different profession. Why the harper was in Scotland is more speculative, but since the Irish poet *Ferghal Og Mac an Bhaird* had also been at court in May of that year the harper had possibly been traveling with him to provide the poet's accompaniment.²⁴

It is not clear whether the harper returned to Ireland with the poet, remained in Scotland or became an occasional visitor, but what is certainly the same man reappears in a Scottish record some twenty years later among the papers of the Elphinstone Family. In an account book kept by James Smyth for Lord Elphinstone between the years 1602 to 1604, recorded on the 26th September 1602 was a payment to *william mageigan clarsererof* the sum of 20 shillings followed in October by another describing him as the *Ireland clarseroer* and for the same amount. The original estates of the Elphinstone family were centred around Carberry in East Lothian therefore not far from Edinburgh. However they had also acquired most of the Earldom of Mar and the payments to William MacEgan the *clarsair* seem to have been made at Kildrummy Castle.²⁵

Although the harp was disappearing from the Scottish Court, (mainly being replaced by the viol); as shown by the last two '*clarsairs*', one a native Scot and the other a visiting Irishman, harpers continued to be patronised by the rest of aristocracy. Normally where the Royal Court led the aristocracy would have followed but that process was interrupted by the courts removal to London in 1603. Previously the Scottish Court had been more open and accessible but the move to England added distance and cost meaning that although those Scots attending court were still exposed to the Crown's latest musical tastes, the diffusion of the musical fashions were less direct but now filtered through any changes adopted by courtiers on returning to Scotland.

This meant that the continued use of harps in Scotland over the seventeenth century started to become patchy with the gut strung harps being the first to come under pressure from the violin family. Up until this point a 'map' of the gut strung harps would, as far as mainland Scotland was concerned, almost mirror that of the wire strung instruments, albeit only in 'Lowland Scotland' extending from the southwest, through the 'central belt' and then swinging northwards to the east of the highland line and extending up through Caithness to Orkney. That there is evidence of tension between harpers and 'fiddlers' but not with other musicians does appear to be significant. The earliest noted so far was a gut strung harper called William Caddell, from Caithness who was murdered by a fiddler called Ogilvy in Edinburgh in 1594.

This was followed in 1595 by a record in the Burgh records of Aberdeen concerning a brawl between a Gilbert Johnstone violar and a '*Magnes Gareaut harper*'. Although described as a harper in that account when he turns up again in 1602 and he was noted in the Elphinstone papers as '*Manus Gario herper*', receiving a payment of 20 shillings. It was not clear where the payment occurred but again Kildrummy

Castle seems likely, especially as the harpers name was probably derived locally from the area known as The Garioch.

By the start of the seventeenth century the number of the (predominantly Lowland Scots), gut strung harpers, was beginning to fall as they were affected by changing musical tastes. These new influences took longer to have an impact in the Gaelic speaking areas, but as the players of the clarsach still included most of the Lowlands as part of their circuit, it is not too surprising to find some evidence of antagonism between fiddlers and *clarsairs*. When in 1638 the Laird of Grant had enquired of his agent in Ayr why the '*clairscher*' had failed to return, he was informed that there had been a drunken fight between the harper and a violer named John Hay, from which the violer had emerged with the more serious injuries.²⁶

Ironically the Grant family were to lead the move from being patrons of a number of *clarsairs* during the first half of the seventeenth century to promoting the use of viols over the second half of that century and on into the eighteenth. Indeed at one point between 1735 to 1738 they had one of the Cumming family musicians being taught to play the French Horn before then settling on the fiddle.⁷ The Grants were one of the principal families in Strathspey and it is clear from a 1692 account of the delivery of 'bardic' verse in that region, that the viol had already replaced the harp as the accompaniment used there.²⁸

These changing musical fashions over time creates one of the problems in attempting to produce a meaningful geographical 'map' of where the clarsach was to be found in Scotland. For this reason 1650 is used as the upper date limit for the references used in this mapping exercise. Although by the middle of the seventeenth century the gut strung harps mainly used in lowland Scotland had mostly been replaced by viols/fiddles; it was not until the second half of that century that the clarsach having suffered the same fate as the gut harps in lowland Scotland also started to be replaced even to the west of the 'highland line'.

Another aspect of these changes and the disappearance of the gut harps was that a need to differentiate between gut and wirestrung instruments was also removed and players who by their names and locations were more likely to be playing *clarsachs* were simply described as just 'harpers'. Fortunately when this happens, including some prior to 1650, omitting them from the map does not actually affect the distribution plots.

There is a further problem even in the period before 1650, that when trying to create a 'map', a few references to *clarsairs* occur which do not provide a firm location. Perhaps the best example of this comes from the Seaforth papers. An account for Colin MacKenzie of Kintail for 1570 includes payments to two *clarsairs*, one when the laird appears to have been at Redcastle on the Black Isle and the other who was '*passand to the Mounth*'. It has been suggested that this last was another name for Strathpeffer,²⁹ although the 'mounth or mount' was also the old name for the Grampian Mountains and is still to be found today in the name of the high pass called *Cairn o' Mounth*.

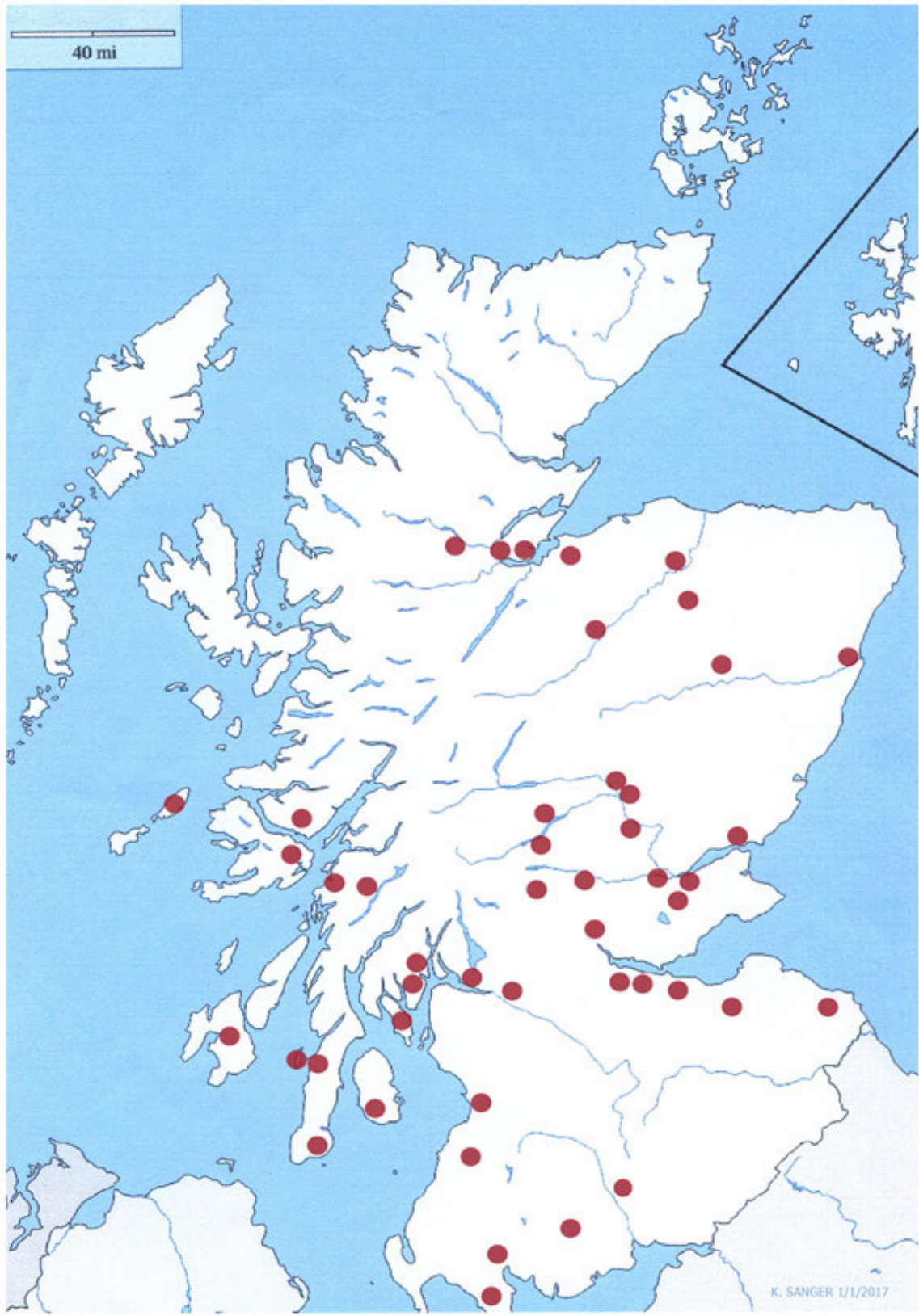
However, whichever of the two places is meant they are both a long way from Kintail from where Mackenzie gained his 'title', but both then and later; after that family had gained the title 'Earls of Seaforth' and their lands had extended to include the Isle of Lewis; they preferred to base themselves close to Inverness on the east side of Scotland. A similar situation occurs with the MacKenzies of Applecross which is also on the north west side of mainland Scotland. The family were praised for their patronage of poets and harpers including according to one poem the harper to the Earl of Antrim. But, they also preferred to actually live over on the East coast near Fortrose where they erected their family tomb.³⁰ Likewise when what is possibly the Irish *clarsair* in question appears in the contemporary records in 1623, he too is noted as being in Brahan, near to Inverness.³¹

There are two further qualifications which need to be made before considering the resulting map and the possible implications. Firstly the map has to be viewed with the topography of Scotland in mind. A lot of the large blank areas are actually filled with sparsely inhabited mountains or in the southern border country with moorland, both of which reduce the habitable area. Secondly there is the question of Scotland's population and its distribution throughout the country, which probably poses even more problems than plotting a map of *clarsairs*. Before the Reverend Webster's 'census' of 1755 which produced a population figure of just over 1.2 million people, estimates of population are just that. However, working back from that figure it is unlikely that the population at the cut off point for the map of 1650 would have exceeded one million and was probably closer to around 800,000 people.

Whatever the correct number actually was, it is generally agreed that the population was more evenly distributed around the country than is the case today and that the majority of people lived directly on the land from which they gained their subsistence. While Gaelic had for some time been retreating from its maximum extent, it was probably still spoken by close to half the population and the linguistic dividing line was far from clear cut. Therefore it is not always possible to determine if some musicians noted as players of the clarsach should be classed as a Gael or not. For example a Robert MacMillan who was described as 'harper at Glasgow' in his testament drawn up in 1597 certainly played a clarsach, which he left to Andro Callum, a minstrel in Edinburgh. However neither of their testaments, (Andro Callum died in 1611), suggests that either of them operated outside that central Lowland Scots speaking area.³²

Musicians are notably mobile and having a 'home' base does not prevent them from cropping up in the records some way from home. For example we know of two members of a family of harpers called Reid who were attached to the Earl of Athole. One of them described as Alistair Reid harper and servant to the Earl of Athole was said to have been buried in the the old grave yard at Scone in 1639.³³ The second member of the family noted as '*James Reid clarserer*' first appears in a list of payments from 1602 at Auchindoun in which the entry suggests a connection to Athole. However when he appears again 1621 along with his unnamed 'son' and '*his berar*' (the servant to carry the clarsach), it is in the Dundas Papers³⁴ and finally in 1638 when as '*James Reid clairshichar*' he seems to have received a 'boll' of probably meal (the document is damaged at this point), from John Stewart of Dalguise acting as chamberlain to the Bishop of Dunkeld.³⁵

Perhaps the most mobile of all were the groups of musicians and entertainers referred to earlier, who were known in Gaelic as the *cliar sheanchain*. The term seems to cover both the Poet or *File* with his personal entourage making a 'circuit' of other potential patrons outside of his home base; to bands of lower grade poets and other entertainers who had no particular home. Both groups were relying on and in some cases abusing the traditional rules of hospitality and both in Ireland and Scotland at various times edicts were issued that attempted to control, especially those performers who had no real 'master' or patron. In a Scottish context there is little recorded contemporary evidence for such 'bands' other than the occasional payments in some seventeenth century household accounts to payments to "women singers at the gate" with no indication that they actually gained entry.



The Map

The inherent problems of making a meaningful map of this sort certainly makes the exercise challenging, (if not foolhardy); although it is similar in principle to mapping archaeological finds which are also always open to changes in interpretation following the ‘next’ find. By concentrating on distribution, that is the geographical spread of where players specifically described as ‘*clarsairs*’ were noted in the surviving records the distorting effect of manuscript survival is lessened. Therefore where several generations of harpers are based at one specific location, they only merit one dot on the map rather than indicating density of harpers by multiple dots, which may only indicate a more complete survival of source manuscripts for that area.

Therefore it cannot be over emphasised that the map has to be approached with a clear idea of its limitations in mind. Its main purpose is not to make a definitive statement but to provide some sort of basis to raise a question regarding the use of the clarsach or wirestrung harp in Scotland which became evident to me after my research into the harp in Scotland commenced some years ago. It quickly became clear that the harpers who appeared in the records did not fit the expected patterns. To put it simply there was a very large hole where the players of the clarsach should have been. Initially it was possible to put it down to just the vagaries of the surviving sources and to some extent that is still true, but despite an increasing awareness that things were not just that simple it provided an excuse to avoid the problem of dealing with an alternative explanation.

Discussion

On looking at the map it is quite evident that there is a clear lack of ‘dots’ in the north west mainland and the outer isles, which is a rather dramatic way of posing the question which is the point of this discussion. Some examples of what might be called ‘floating dots’ have already been touched on earlier in this article where a ‘*clarsair*’ appears without a geographical location, but in the accounts of a ‘laird’ whose estate which spreads almost from one side of Scotland to the other, the Seaforth lands for example. It is possible to add to these the case of ‘*Magnus the clarsocher*’ who features in the accounts of Donald MacKay, later to become the first Lord Reay while he was in the Netherlands in 1627. MacKay was there arranging provisions for the regiment he had raised the previous year for the service of the King of Denmark. The payments which included *clarsoch strings* might suggest that it was Mackay’s own musician travelling with him and potentially add a ‘dot’ back home in the ‘Reay’ country. But even if we could be certain about the *clarsair* being his servant, the Mackay lands of Strathnaver covered a rather large part of North West Sutherland and one ‘dot’ would still look rather lost.

Turning to the Island of Skye, another surprisingly blank space, it is possible to add a further qualification albeit one which may obscure more than it clarifies. Among the names listed in the *Book of the Dean of Lismore* there is a record of what has been interpreted to read as ‘*[Far]chir mcricardi with Mcloyd*’, or Fearchar, son of Richard and that he was employed by MacLeod of Dunvegan.³⁶ If indeed this was a family of harpers as that article suggests, then the progenitor ‘Richard’ could just be old enough to connect to a late medieval grave slab with a representation of a harper in the Kilchoan cemetery at Glendale in Skye. However the name ‘Richard’ creates its own problems as it was not originally a Gaelic name but first comes to prominence in England (especially with one notable Anglo–Norman King). The names later use in Scotland was limited and even then mostly in what would be regarded as Lowland Scotland rather than in Gaelic Scotland. Therefore when it is found again being used as a forename twice in a contemporary MacLeod document with no evidence it had any previous connections to that area nor does it seem to occur later then it justifies some discussion.

The document is among the Dunvegan papers and is an instrument of Sasine written in Latin, dated the 6th and 9th May 1541 and was executing an earlier charter and precept involving the MacLeod lands in Harris, Skye and Glenelg. As it had to be 'seised' in each place there are three separate witness lists. The witnesses for the first one signed at 'Osykill' in Skye were *Alexandro Graeme, Evano Piper, Donald McIvir fabri, Nigello McArthur Baine, Dugallo Andrea et Ricardo Leiche*. Then in among the witnesses in the second leg signed at 'Rovil' (Rodel in Harris), there was recorded as second in the list a *Richardo McConnell*.³⁷ This document is interesting for several reasons as witnesses usually were listed in order of their status and it would appear that *Evano* the piper was therefore ranked above both the 'smith' (*fabri*) and the mediciner Richard Leech, (*Ricardo Leiche*). Given the date of this document and the date range for the *Book of the Dean of Lismore* namelists then, especially with the otherwise uncommon appearance of those names associated with MacLeod, either of these two 'Richards' could be candidates for the one mentioned in those lists.

None of this could be said to make a strong case for claiming that there were *clarsairs* around in those 'blank spaces' although it seems unlikely that it was totally devoid of their presence albeit if only as visitors. Therefore the conclusion to be drawn given the various qualifications concerning such a mapping exercise is that players of the clarsach were not present in very large numbers and it was more the periphery rather than the centre of the clarsach in Scotland. This in turn prompts the question "if this surprising conclusion is correct, then why?" which is of course the reason the mapping exercise was undertaken to provide the basis for raising and exploring that question but to propose an answer requires re-examining the early history of that area.

The northwest highlands, Skye and the outer isles have for well over a century been regarded as the heartland of Gaeldom today, to an extent that it tends to be forgotten that it was not always the case. The original Gaelic 'Heartland' in Scotland comprised the area known today as Argyle, which in its original form extended further north to Ardnamurchan and beyond that point the indigenous people fell within the cultural grouping collectively known as the 'Picts'. When in 2009 the bridge of a 'Lyre' dating to circa 550-450 BC was found in the excavations at the High Pasture Cave near Torrin on Skye it tended to be overlooked that the people who had used the bridge and placed it there were not the more recent Gaelic speaking inhabitants of Skye, but were 'proto' Picts; the forerunners of the later culture which by around the 8th century had moved on from lyres and started including triangular harps on the Pictish carved stones erected in what was by then their core lands in northeast Scotland.

By that same period the indigenous inhabitants of the northwest highlands, Skye and the outer isles were being subsumed under Scandinavian, primarily Norse rule. Few of the earlier placenames survived that experience and most of the older pre Gaelic names are Norse in origin. Interestingly studies have shown that the Norse names can be divided into an inner and outer zone and that outer zone mirrors the blank space on the Clarsach Map albeit with some slight overlap into the northern parts of the inner zone.³⁸ It is at this point that we reach a version of the 'elephant in the room', except that we know it should be there but we cannot see it. The Scandinavian world had its own poets along with musical instruments and as both the poets and musicians would have travelled with their patrons they too would have been present during that period of Scandinavian rule. However to date, the musicians have left no surviving evidence of their instruments, although we know from finds elsewhere that their stringed instrument would have been some form of lyre.

Scandinavian rule finally came to an end when the Norwegian possessions in the west of Scotland were ceded to the King of Scots at the Treaty of Perth in 1266. Though by that time the Gaelic language was already making inroads and proceeded to spread to the whole of those former Norse speaking territories. However, although they were absorbed into the Gaelic speaking world it was primarily a linguistic takeover

and the cultural roots were shallow as shown by some recent DNA studies, the most reliable of which was undertaken on the MacNeills of Barra.³⁹ The idea that the whole of Gaelic Scotland was orientated towards Ireland has increasingly come under review and there is now a growing acceptance that while it was true for the former MacDonald Lords of the Isles with their strong connections to Ireland and a presence in Antrim, it cannot be generalised to the rest of Gaelic Scotland.⁴⁰

This is especially true when looking at the clarsach during that late medieval and early modern period. In the classical Irish structure the two professional classes of Poets and Harpers were closely linked. The poet or *file* who was the senior of the two artists composed verse which was then declaimed by the *reacaire* to an accompaniment provided by the *clarsair*. In Scotland this is demonstrated by the rentals of the lands of former Lords of the Isles in Kintyre where the *MacMhuirich* Poets and *MacIlshenoch* harpers held their lands. However beyond that part of Argyll evidence is harder to find and it is thought that for most of Gaelic Scotland the roles were combined in the person of a Bard. Although a number of references to families or individuals described as bards can be found they too are scarce in that part of the map which appears devoid of harpers at least until circa 1600 when members of two families of poets both originally of Irish origin appear on the scene. One when the *MacMhuirich* family relocated from Kintyre and the other called *Ó Muirgheasain*, the retained use of the 'O' prefix indicating they were a more recent arrival from Ireland.

Whatever the motives were for these poets to move northwards, in the case of the *MacMhuirich*'s to South Uist and the *Ó Muirgheasain*'s to Mull and then an intermittent presence at Dunvegan, that they were able to do so without any problems suggests that there was little competition already there. They were in fact in 'Gaelic' terms moving to an area peripheral not just to Ireland but also to some degree to the rest of Gaelic Scotland. That different environment probably explains why later in the seventeenth century three of the more prominent Gaelic poets were women, who it has been noted "attained literary prominence earlier than in Ireland".⁴¹ Furthermore as this is meant to be about maps, it is worth noting that the locations of the ladies concerned, *Mairghread nighean Lachlainn* of Mull, *Máiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh* of Skye and *Sileas na Ceapaich* of Keppoch then afterwards near Huntley geographically places them in or near to the boundary which has been described as "anything north of a line from Ardnamurchan to Inverness was outside the reach of the Lordship of the Isles and thus escaped the full benefit of cultural interaction with Ireland".⁴²

Returning to that 'peripheral or blank' area of the map, whose inhabitants would have been somewhere in the process of moving from a Scandinavian dominated environment to the adoption of not just the Gaelic language but also the Irish influenced cultural aspects of life that went with the language. However the formal professional structures of the more traditionally conservative Irish model with the *file* at its apex would certainly have been weaker, if not lacking altogether and also explains why the bagpipe and its player was able to rapidly rise in professional status. When and how the bagpipe arrived in that area is still a matter of some speculation, but its introduction (or adoption, if as now thought it probably overlaps with the mouth blown triple pipe), is probably a little earlier than generally thought. The earliest record of a bagpipe in Britain is from an illumination from circa 1266-1280 in the hand of an English artist in the manuscript known as the '*Murthly Hours*'. Then just a little later a bagpiper appears in the court accounts of Edward I in 1286 and from then on the references continue to increase.⁴³ Oddly, bearing in mind that it was a Norman French Court and the records were kept mainly in Latin although the term *Chevretter* also sometimes appears, the use of *Bagepipa/Baggepiper* might suggest the instrument had been around long enough to develop a more colloquial name form.⁴⁴

Tracking the bagpipe in Scotland over that period is hindered by the loss of Scottish Records due to the Wars of Independence but some references from the English records suggest at least one route. Many of the Scottish nobility were themselves part Norman and were familiar with Edward's Court and some of them

according to those court records even had their own minstrels with them during the visits.⁴⁵ It is therefore unlikely that if the bagpipe was known in the court circles at that time that knowledge would not have travelled back to Scotland. Nor need it be the case that the bagpipe arrived in Scotland by only one route. If the instrument had arrived in England from the continent then it could also have arrived in Scotland through that direct route. Following the loss of Berwick during the Wars of Independence the Scottish shipping moved to more northern ports including Aberdeen where a number of early references to pipers occur, including in 1519 a John Piper alias Cumming who was probably an ancestor of the family of musicians who were to serve the Lairds of Grant.⁴⁶

There is possibly an even more northerly route which should not be overlooked, especially as one of the earliest realistic pictures of a piper in an area with historical links to the Western Isles occurs there. In the Scandinavian chart known as the *Carta Marina* drawn by Olaus Magnus in 1539 there is a man shown standing on Faroe playing a two drone bagpipe.⁴⁷ Why he is there is unclear as the only other musician on the chart is a player of some sort of fiddle placed right up in the north end of Iceland. The evidence for the historical sea route dates back to at least as early as the 10th century and the distribution of a particular type of ring head pin which runs from Dublin via the Hebrides to Orkney, Shetland, Faroe then Iceland.⁴⁸ There is of course no reason to assume that the bagpipe only entered Scotland from only one particular direction, nor that it had to be as an actual instrument rather than the idea of adding a bag to an existing form of pipes.

The discussion tends to become fixated on the ‘bag’, but the suggestion that some form of triple pipe, which certainly had been present and preceded the bagpipe, simply acquired a bag has been gaining currency.⁴⁹ It is an interesting concept because the change from a mouthblown triple pipe using circular breathing to adding a bag and blow pipe is primarily technical and initially would not change how the pipes were fingered or what was played.⁵⁰ It merely over time allows the instrument to grow and there certainly are signs in Scotland that bagpipes were getting bigger and by around 1590 the first sign of the ‘Great Pipe’ appears⁵¹ which implies that there was also a smaller one. Confirmed by an entry in the Stirling Presbytery Records for 1599 when a piper called James Mcfarlane was brought before the Session for profaning the Sabbath and in his defence stated that his master Alexander Bruce of Auchinbowie did violently drag him from his house and because he refused to play broke his small pipe and then forced him to play on the great pipe.⁵² Of course a larger instrument equates with it being a louder instrument reflecting its growing use outdoors; playing for dancing, which for most people would have been an outdoor activity, as a ‘signal’ instrument in the hands of the Burgh Pipers playing first thing in the morning and last thing at night and also from at least 1574 playing to the shearers at harvest.⁵³

Apart from increasing references to the ‘great pipe’ the nature of the way that the pipers appear in the contemporary references also showed signs of change. In most of the earlier references the pipers were shown mostly in peaceful circumstances as witnesses to documents or simply receiving payments for performing, (the personal Scottish household accounts for Mary Queen of Scots show payments to pipers although as those accounts were kept in French they are entered as ‘*cornemuzeux*’).⁵⁴ As the seventeenth century progressed references to pipers and the ‘Great Pipe’ increasingly showed a militarisation of their roles in leading bodies of armed men, not just in the ‘Highlands’ but all over Scotland. Interestingly, when the Scottish Parliament first formalised the position of ‘piper’ as a component of a Scottish Regiment in 1640, the surviving muster rolls, (from both before and after that date), show that the pipers when present were in fact all Lowlanders until almost the end of that century.

It has been suggested that because references to bagpipes do not appear in any Classical Gaelic verse and that when mentioned in the vernacular verse it was described in terms of being ‘loud’ and associated with war that this relates to when it was introduced and how it “usurped the place of the clarsach in such a short

time”.⁵⁵ As already noted the fact that a larger and more powerful instrument eminently suited to outdoor use had gradually developed and that it was therefore also more suitable for leading groups of armed men, not just in ‘Gaelic Scotland’, was also noticed by the authorities of the Crown. Where the situations differed was that the more peaceful uses of that instrument can be documented in the hands of the Burgh Pipers, playing for ‘calls’, for dancing and to accompany work, (harvesting for example), in the more dispersed settlement fashions of most of ‘Gaelic’ Scotland those roles were taken by the ‘highland’ pipers.⁵⁶

The claim that the bagpipe had specifically taken the place of the clarsach and in a very short time is possibly a result of an over generalisation based on a relatively small amount of source information and from continuing to treat Scotland and Ireland as one uniform Gaelic world. There is absolutely no evidence that the clarsach and bagpipe were ever in conflict which is not surprising as they both filled different roles. The clarsach, like the gut strung harp of Scotland before it was ultimately displaced by the viola/fiddle along with the declining role of the *File* and the need for the *clarsair* to support the performance of his verse. For the apparent speed of the change it is necessary to return to consider the ‘map’. Once more it is necessary to emphasise that the map has to be treated with a degree of circumspection, it is indicative but can never be definitive. The numbers are small and although more may be added over time the fact that the cut off point of 1650, albeit used for sound reasons, removes Rorie Dall Morison otherwise the only clarsach player noted on Skye demonstrates how wildly such swings can occur.

To suggest that no harper ever ventured into that large blank area covering the north west highlands and outer Hebrides would be nonsense. That poet bands of varying status moved around going from one potential patron to another is well documented, though while it is easy to see how that would have functioned in Ireland and parts of mainland Scotland, travel to most of the northwest and certainly to the islands could only have been undertaken by approval of whichever local laird controlled the seagoing vessels so the visiting poet entourages were probably smaller and less frequent. Indeed a poem in the *Book of the Dean of Lismore* to MacLeod of Lewis makes mention of the poet bands, but neither it nor the only other MacLeod poem there, composed for a MacLeod of Harris provide any evidence of any ‘house poets’. Judging by its last verse the author of the latter was not actually with MacLeod but expecting him to come from the north. Although it is possible that some poems have not survived it is noticeable that while there are a number of Irish Bardic poems composed for the leaders of the Scottish Gaelic warriors fighting in Ireland, the earliest one to be composed by an *O Muirgheasáin* poet probably actually residing in Skye only dates to 1626, although one member of that family witnessed a deed in 1614.⁵⁷ Similarly the earliest poem to MacLeod (or rather Dunvegan), from a *MacMhuirich* after they had moved north to serve MacDonald of Clan Ranald is probably no earlier than 1613.⁵⁸

Clearly the poets moving from areas which, although starting to undergo change, still had strong cultural links to the classical school of Gaelic Verse; to arriving in a far more diffuse cultural mix would have required some adaption. For example in terms of the poetry their genealogical references changed from looking backwards to Irish connections to instead emphasising their new patron’s Scandinavian roots. There is no evidence that they brought any harpers with them, (new names from outside the local area who should have shown up in the increasing amount of documentary sources from that period). Nor is there any evidence that they would have found any resident harpers already there while any visiting harpers have failed to leave even a toe print; to put it in modern terms, the Outer Isles were harper-lite.

On the other hand on their arrival those parts the *O’Muirgheasáin* and *MacMhuirich* vanguards would have found that the pipers having already arrived in a more fluid cultural environment had thrived and established a professional niche for themselves. By the time of those early seventeenth century dates when evidence of the poets activity first appears, apart from ‘Evan piper’ the witness to the MacLeod 1541 Sasine who was

probably a MacCrummon with ecclesiastical links,⁴⁸ there were also pipers attached to MacLeod of Rasaay, MacNeill of Barra and MacLean of Duart and also right across Ross to Dingwall and round into Sutherland. It therefore seems unlikely that the rise of the piping profession had much if any direct influence on the demise of the *clarsair*, who were most affected by the increasing penetration of the bowed instruments.

There are two further interlinked observations, ('conclusions' would imply a greater degree of certainty than is justified), about the map that can be made. In the book *Tree of Strings* we suggested based on the chronological evidence that the triangular frame harp having first appeared in the Pictish area was then acquired by their Gaelic speaking neighbours in Argyle and from there spread to Ireland. Then somewhere within that Gaelic world it acquired metal strings. Based on the map distribution it is possible to push that chronology further. Following the emergence of Alba from the merging of the former lands of the Picts with those of the 'Scots' of Argyle, for a while Gaelic became the dominant language in the new kingdom. With language also come aspects of the associated culture and the distribution of the *clarsairs* on the map suggests that it also included the *clarsach*,⁶⁰ but when the Gaelic language started to retreat again as the 'Scots' languages started to become more dominant in the south and east of the country, the wirestrung harp remained and continued to co-exist with the gut harp, helped by the presence of a central Royal Court which continued to support both instruments.

The fact that the plots on the map shifts the centre or 'heart' of the *clarsach* away from the north west and towards the part of Scotland where by their names the tunes known as 'Ports' are most associated seems unlikely to be just a coincidence. The 'Ports' are generally considered to be an original form of harp tune although there is at least one dissent from that view.⁶¹ There has also been a modern tendency to try and associate them with one of two 'known' harpers, (see addendum). What does seem more likely is that they were compositions that arose during the period when both the *clarsach* and gut harp along with the lute were all employed in the same cultural milieu surrounding the Royal Court circle and simply became adapted to each of those instruments.

Addendum

It is always daunting when assuming the role of the boy in the nursery tale who pointed out that the Emperor was a little deficient in the clothing department, especially when the subject is '*Rory Dall O'Cathain*', who has almost acquired an iconic status comparable to the Brian Boru Harp. While the Brian Boru connection has since been discarded the instrument now usually known as the Trinity College Harp does actually still exist. With the harper however it is possible to wonder if he was a result of a misunderstood oral version of an event recounted to Johnson and Boswell during their visit to the Western Isles. Certainly all the ingredients are there, the family name from the main character *Echlin O'Cathain*, Rory Dall from the Scottish harper of that name and the fact that it took place in Scotland providing a hook on which to hang and explain the presence in Ireland of the Scottish named 'Ports'.

The main source for Rory Dall O' Cathain is the account taken down from Arthur O Neill around 1808 by a scribe working for Edward Bunting. That account was then used by the writer of the history section of Bunting's 1840 publication. What has always been curious is that about 30 years earlier Echlin O Cathain <http://www.wirestrungharp.com/harps/harpers/o-cathain-echlin.html> also gave a short account of his life and some earlier harpers which was taken down from him at Inverneill in Argyle. He makes no mention of Rory Dall O' Cathain which given Rory Dall was supposedly famous and they shared the same family name is a little odd.

The first serious academic study of Rory Dall O' Cathain was undertaken by Professor Colm Ó Baoill as part of his paper *Some Irish Harpers in Scotland* published in 1971. He starts by referring to Arthur O

Neill's account of O'Cathain's background and noting that "while Arthur cannot be contradicted on present knowledge, the known history of the O Cathain family does not support his account in any way";⁶² then on the presumption that O'Cathain did exist continues to explore other avenues, albeit without finding any firm contemporary evidence. This paper has often been quoted but usually without including the author's meticulous academic qualification of his results.

This was followed in 2001 by Alan Fletcher's *Drama and the Performing Arts in Pre-Cromwellian Ireland*. Started under the umbrella of the Records of Early English Drama Project, (REED), it is the most comprehensive study of the early sources pertaining to musicians and similar performers yet undertaken. It makes absolutely no mention of a Rory Dall O'Cathain despite covering the period during which he was supposed to have flourished. Another project is currently underway, again under the umbrella of REED, to compile a similar study covering Scotland with a team led by Professor J McGavin. Although it is a work still in progress, to date they have not found any contemporary references to O'Cathain although they have added some more names to the corpus of Scottish Harpers.

Since around 1974 the present writer has been searching for the harper O'Cathain in Scotland specifically targeting those contemporary family and state records with which he was claimed to have been associated; the result to date being a perfect blank. Even the arguments that have attributed the transfer of the Scottish 'Ports' into the Irish repertoire having been due to O'Cathain have been overtaken by the solid evidence that the harper William MacEgan was in Scotland between 1581 and 1602 at the very time those tunes were in vogue.

Finally in 2007, Professor Ó Baoill revisited the subject in a contribution to a collection of studies on the musical life of Scots in the seventeenth Century.⁶³ Once again starting with a presumption that a harper called Rory Dall O' Cathain did exist the background is reviewed but without finding any new evidence other than mentioning in a footnote a claim that the grave of 'Rory Dall' somewhere in the West Highlands had been visited in the early 19th century. The reference given by Professor Ó Baoill is correct in that it says in the copy of *Chambers Edinburgh Journal* for 19 September 1840, but the editor of that paper claims to have been quoting Alexander Campbell and his own papers make it quite clear that the grave he visited was that of Murdoch MacDonald who had been harper to MacLean of Coll and died circa 1740. Therefore to return to Professor Ó Baoill's conclusion, "but the argument is based on no real evidence, and until some is found we must conclude that the only relic we have of Ruairi Dall Ó Catháin is his music".

The music evidence can be briefly summarised thus;— There was a tune in the *Straloch manuscript* whose compilation is dated to circa 1627-29, called *Port Rorie Dall* and as it is generally agreed that date is too early to be the Scottish Rorie Dall Morison then by default it must be Rorie Dall O Cathain. One problem is that the *Straloch MS* has been missing since it was auctioned in 1845 and so has never been subjected to a modern examination to confirm it was all of one period and hand. Modern studies of other music manuscripts have demonstrated that additions could often be made by later owners and bindings could be added or changed. However, that is the minor quibble, the main problem occurs with what is usually referred to as the *Straloch MS*, which is a partial transcript of some of the tunes made by G F Graham in 1839, before the original disappeared.

That is the source on which the claim for a *Port Rorie Dall* is based since it is included among those transcripts and it seems at last we might have some solid evidence for Rorie Dall O Cathain. However, as tends to happen with this subject a grey mist of doubt swirls over the scene. Apart from the transcripts G F Graham also made a separate list of the contents of the manuscript and among discrepancies between the titles in the transcripts and those in the lists, the absence of any tune called Port Rorie Dall is one of them.⁶⁴ Did he just manage to miss that tune title out of his list? Or did he recognise a tune in the manuscript which

had later become better known as *Port Rorie Dall* from some association with the Scottish harper? It would after all not be the first time a tune with harp associations had undergone a title switch, as evidenced by the Angus Fraser MS.

Unfortunately we shall never know unless the original *Straloch manuscript* ever re-surfaces. But overall the evidence, or rather the lack of any, for a Rorie Dall O’Cathain does not provide much of a base on which to build his character. Or to return to the beginning, it would be nice if some clothes of some sort could be found for the Emperor.

¹ This article stems from a problem with the draft of a different article altogether, “The Lamont Harp; the physical evidence and its historical context”. On arriving at what was meant to be a brief conclusion that the parts of the Lamont Harp were probably more representative of most of the Scottish wirestrung harps of that period, the justifying footnote started to grow until it had moved up into the main text. When that in turn threatened to outgrow the original draft it became clear that I would need to tackle the place of the clarsach in Scotland first. It was in any case becoming difficult to avoid that topic by using the ‘lack of source material’ claim when it was clear that there was more to it than that simple explanation. This has therefore been written quickly, it will certainly need to be re-visited once I have time. Apart from anything else it needs a better map with numbered ‘dots’ along with an expanded corresponding list giving the detail and justification for each dot. It should therefore be viewed less as a finished article but more as a footnote with ambitions.

² National Records of Scotland (NRS) RS C22/52/254

³ Bannerman, J. ‘The King’s’ Poet and the Inauguration of Alexander III’. *The Scottish Historical Review*, Vol LXVIII. (October 1989)

⁴ Bannerman, J. ‘The Residence of the King’s Poet’, in *Scottish Gaelic Studies*. Vol XVII. (1996).

⁵ Anderson, J. ed. *The Laing Charters 854-1837*, (1899).

⁶ Scott W. W, ed. ‘Eight Thirteenth Century Texts’, in Miscellany XIII, *Scottish History Society*. 5th Series. Vol 14, (2004)

⁷ Anderson, J. ed. *The Laing Charters 854-1837*, (1899).

⁸ NRS GD137/370 and GD137/3711; printed in Macphail J. R. N, ed. Highland Papers, Vol ii. *Scottish History Society*. Second Series vol 12 (1916). 175-177

⁹ *Exchequer Rolls* volume 5. (1882). 56.

¹⁰ Watson W. J. *Bardachd Albannach, Scottish Verse from the Book of the Dean of Lismore*. (1978), 32-59.

¹¹ Thomson D. S. ‘Gaelic Learned Orders and Literati in Medieval Scotland’, in *Scottish Studies*. Vol 12. (1986), part 3. 69.

- ¹² Pia Coira M. *By Poetic Authority, The Rhetoric of Panegyric in Gaelic Poetry of Scotland to c. 1700.* (2012). 261.
- ¹³ Watson W. J. *Bardachd Albannach, Scottish Verse from the Book of the Dean of Lismore.* (1978), 14-21.
- ¹⁴ Munro J and Munro R. W. *Acts of the Lords of the Isles 1336-1493.* (1986). lxxii.
- ¹⁵ Sanger K, ‘The McShannons of Kintyre; Harpers to Tacksmen’ , in *The Scottish Genealogist. Vol 38. No 3 (1991).*
- ¹⁶ Bannerman, J. ‘The Clársach and the Clársair’, in *Scottish Studies.*
- ¹⁷ NRS GD190/3/80/2
- ¹⁸ *Miscellany of the Scottish History Society.* Vol iv (1926). 265.
- ¹⁹ National Register of Archives for Scotland. 1209/696/17.
- ²⁰ For examples see NRS GD248/14/5. They mostly seemed to work in pairs.
- ²¹ Treasurers Accounts, volume XIII (1574-1580), 50, 86 and 142.
- ²² Information from John McGavin.
- ²³ NRS E21/62 My thanks to John Harrison for this reference.
- ²⁴ For the background of the poet see Pádraig O’Macháin. *Poems by Fearghal Og Mac an Bhaird*, unpublished Ph.D. Thesis (Edinburgh University 1988); The earlier reference to a *Lachlann mac a Bhaird* in the name list of the *Book of the Dean of Lismore* while the Franciscan priest *Conchubhar Mac an Bhaird* was able circa 1624 to find a harper and then pose as an Irish Poet on circuit in Scotland begins to look like more than a coincidence and might suggest that Irish family of poets had a particular interest in Scotland.
- ²⁵ NRS GD156/31/1/2, now unfit for production but previously transcribed by John McGavin to whom I owe the reference.
- ²⁶ Fraser W. *The Chiefs of Grant.* Vol. 2.
- ²⁷ NRS GD248/101/1/38
- ²⁸ Gordon, Cosmo. ‘A letter to John Aubrey From Professor James Garden’, in *Scottish Gaelic Studies.* Vol 8 (1958), 18-26.
- ²⁹ O’Baioill, Colm. ‘Highland Harpers and their patrons’, in J. Porter ed. *Defining Strains; The Musical Life of Scots in the Seventeenth Century.* (2007). 195 and footnote 73.

- ³⁰ MacDonald, K D. ‘Mackenzie of Applecross’, in *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, vol. liv (1980); O’Baoill C. ‘Highland Harpers and their patrons’, in *Defining Strains, The Musical Life of Scots in the Seventeenth Century*. ed Porter J. (2007), 195.
- ³¹ NRS DI62/7 f79v My thanks to Thomas Brochard for this reference.
- ³² NRS CC8/8/31/236 and CC8/8/48/7
- ³³ Sanger K and Kinnaird A. *Tree of Strings*, (1992) 149.
- ³⁴ NRS GD156/31/1/2 and NLS Adv Ms. 80.3.11 Information from Professor John McGavin.
- ³⁵ NRS GD38/1/156/15
- ³⁶ Bannerman, John. ‘The Clarsach and the Clársair’, in *Scottish Studies*. Vol 30. (1991). 7.
- ³⁷ MacLeod R. C of MacLeod ed. *The Book of Dunvegan*. (1938) 30-32.
- ³⁸ Cox, Richard, ‘Descendants of Norse BÓLSTADR?: A re-examination of the lineage of BOLST & co’, in Baldwin J. ed. *Peoples & Settlement in North-West Ross*. (1994), 43-67, especially Fig. 3.10; Jennings, A. and Kruse, A. ‘One coast — three peoples: names and ethnicity in the Scottish west during the early Viking period’, in *Scandinavian Scotland – 20 Years On*. (2009).
- ³⁹ This showed that the traditional claims to descent from a Gaelic predecessor, often claimed to be ‘Niall of the the Nine Hostages’ cannot be sustained and that the families origins are Norse. The pedigree claims of the McNeills in general have long been suspect and the late Duke of Argyll held the view that the Barra McNeills did not belong to the same stock as the Gigha McNeills over whom they claimed chieftainship. See. Sellar, W. D. H, ‘Family Origins in Cowal and Knapdale’ in *Scottish Studies*. Vol. 15, (1971), Endnote number 31.
- ⁴⁰ MacCoinnich, A. ‘A review of Divided Gaels’ by Wilson McLeod in *History Scotland*. Vol 6. No 5, (Sept/Oct 2006), 50-53.
- ⁴¹ Cunningham, B. ‘Women and Gaelic Literature’, 1500-1800. In. MacCurtain M and O’Dowd M, eds. *Women in Early Modern Ireland*. (1991). 155-156.
- ⁴² MacCoinnich, A. ‘A Review of Divided Gaels’ by Wilson McLeod, published in *History Scotland*, Vol. 6, No 5. (Sept/Oct 2006). As the reviewer points out that statement which is tucked away on page 36 of the book deserves more prominence.
- ⁴³ Sanger, K. ‘The Origins of Highland Piping’, in *Piping Times*. Vol 41, No. 11 (August 1989); Sanger, K. ‘Border Lines’, in *Common Stock*. Vol 10. No 2. (December 1995); National Library of Scotland. Murthly Hours MS.2100. f.10r.
- ⁴⁴ Bullock-Davies, C. *Register of the Royal and Baronial Domestic Minstrels 1272-1327*. (1986) 5 and 76.
- ⁴⁵ Southworth, J. *The English Medieval Minstrel*. (1989). 69.

⁴⁶ Santi Cartularium ecclesiae Nicholai Aberdonensis. *New Spalding Club*. Vol 1. (1888). p 113.

⁴⁷ For an illustration of just the section with piper see the first page of this article on *Blár na Páirce* by Barnaby Brown. *Blár na Páirce — The Battle of Park, c. 1491. Part 1* [https://www.academia.edu/22930369/Bl%C3%A0r_na_P%C3%A0irce_The_Battle_of_Park_c._1491_Part_1] To view a digital scan of the whole map see the link to Carta Marina For further evidence of the connections in that area, Jennings, A. ‘Latter-day Vikings: Gaels in the Northern Isles in the 16th Century’, in *Across the Sólundarhaf: Connections between Scotland and the Nordic World. Selected Papers from the Inaugural St Magnus Conference 2011. Journal of the North Atlantic. Special Volume 4*: 35-42 (2013).

⁴⁸ Hansen, S. S. ‘Viking-Age Faroe Islands and their Southern Links’, in *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic*. ed. Batey, C. Jesch, J. and Morris C. (1993). 480.

⁴⁹ Sanger, K. ‘The Origins of Highland Piping’, in *Piping Times*. Vol. 40. No 11 (August 1989); Brown, B. ‘Lifting the kilt: triplepipes in Sardinia, Ireland and Great Britain’, [www.academia.edu](https://www.academia.edu/28905452/Lifting_the_kilt_triplepipes_in_Sardinia_Ireland_and_Great_Britain) [https://www.academia.edu/28905452/Lifting_the_kilt_triplepipes_in_Sardinia_Ireland_and_Great_Britain]

⁵⁰ What could be construed as a very late reference to a triple pipe or early bagpipe appears in a poem in the *Book of the Dean of Lismore*, (ed. Watson, W J. (1978). Line 1937. The poem on the death of Duncan MacGregor dates to 1518 but its editor speculates it was composed by an elderly man so that could push the memory back into the previous century. In comparison the earliest record of a piper connect to that kindred is a John MacGregor, piper, indueller in Edinburgh who according to his testament died in Oct 1585. Which given a reasonable age for that time would give him a floruit around 1560. (NRS CC8/8/25/69).

The reference as transcribed by Watson from the Dean’s Book reads *nocha cuisle chiuil as sógh*, which the editor has translated as “my delight is not in the melody of flutes”. Flute is just one of the translations of cuisle, whistle, tube or pipe are among the other options and set against the historical background at the time the poem was composed it is not clear why Watson choose Flute. On turning to how it might be interpreted when instead translating it as ‘pipes’ the two possibilities of a triple pipe or a bagpipe open up. As it is perhaps a little late for the triple pipe then it leans towards an early reference to a bagpipe. Against that it can be argued that there is no mention of a ‘bag’, but that actually fits with the evidence from the early Scottish sources where term ‘bagpipe’ is rarely used. In fact there does not seem to be any example in Scottish Gaelic verse, (the oldest Gaelic source we have), for a direct equivalent name which co-joins any of the options for a bag to piob. It is a similar situation in the other records whether they name pipers from either side of the linguistic division, they are simply described as ‘piper/pyper’. The written term ‘bagpipe’ is therefore so rare that it is possible to argue that it would have been very odd indeed if the description of the instrument in the poem had contained any suggestion that it had a bag.

⁵¹ Cramond, W. *The Records of Elgin*. Volume 2. (1908). 26-27.

⁵² NRS CH2/722/3/152. His master wanted him to play for dancing at somewhere on the Auchinbowie Estate called the ‘Peace Craig’, a somewhat ironic name as it had attracted a large crowd wanting to dance and ended with a general fight breaking out.

⁵³ NRS RH9/1/3. To ane pyper to play to the sheraris in harvest £4.

⁵⁴ NRS E33/8 f.21r; E34/282/8, my thanks to Thomas Brochard for help with the transcription and translation.

- ⁵⁵ Newton, M and Cheape, H. 'The Keening of Women and the Roar of the Pipe' From Clársach (c. 1600-1782). *Ars Lyrica*. Vol. 17. (2008). 75-78.
- ⁵⁶ The piobaireachd *Grán a seicheanan 's sial am pocanan* referring to the different storage methods between oats and wheat along with later 17th and 18th C references confirm that pipes were used to lighten peoples workloads. The sort of daily drudge which went on all the time but which also fails to be noted in the Classical Gaelic Verse, although rather than starve the poets were presumably happy to benefit from.
- ⁵⁷ McLeod, W. 'Images of Scottish warriors in later Irish bardic poetry', in Duffy, S. ed. *The World Of The Galloglass* (2007). 169-187.
- ⁵⁸ Thomson, D. S. 'Three Seventeenth Century Bardic Poets: Niall Mor, Cathal and Niall MacMhuirich', in Aitken, A. ed. *Bards and Makars*. (1977), 223.
- ⁵⁹ Sanger, K. 'The MacCrimmon Pipers', in *West Highland Notes & Queries*. Series 2. No 14, (July 1995).
- ⁶⁰ The distribution of the *clarsairs* on the map correlates well with the borders of Gaelic speaking Alba, which at that period did not include the large parts of North and Western Scotland subject to Scandinavian influences.
- ⁶¹ MacKillop, R. 'For kissing for clapping for loving for proveing: Performance practice and modern interpretation of the lute repertoire', in James Porter. ed. *Defining Strains*. (2007), 83.
- ⁶² Ó Baoill, C. 'Some Irish Harpers in Scotland', in *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*. Vol. 47, (1972), 145.
- ⁶³ Ó Baoill, C. 'Two Irish Harpers in Scotland', in James Porter, ed. *Defining Strains*, (2007).
- ⁶⁴ National Library of Scotland Adv. 5. 2. 18

Submitted by Keith Sanger, 31 May, 2017
Copyright © 2017 WireStrungharp.com; all rights reserved