

The Red Speckled Bull

by Barnaby Brown & Allan MacDonald

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

THIS PIBROCH is attributed to Ronald MacDonald of Morar (1662-1741), known in Gaelic as *Ràghmall MacAilein Oig*. He was an aristocratic harper and fiddler as well as a consummate piper and local hero.¹ The *Lament for Ronald MacDonald of Morar*, one of the highlights of the repertoire, can be heard on *Donald MacPherson – A Living Legend* (Siubhal.com vol.1). Numerous folktales tell of his immense strength. This one was told in 1909 by Peter McDonald, a piper living at Acharacle, just south of Moidart and Morar:

Bha Raonull Mac Ailean Òig air a thuras dol coimhead Lochiel, agus thog na Camshronach tarbh guinideach fo taobh Loch Arkaig, agus chuir iad e air thoisich air Raonull, aig abhainn Sgaitheal, agus chuir an tarbh coslas fiadhaich air, agus thubhairt Raonull gum b'fhearr a sheachnadh, ach thubhairt an gille, "Cha mhaith leam iad bhi 'g ràdhtainn gun do theich sinn roimhe". Mar sin, chaidh Raonull s'an tarbh anns an abhainn. Mharbh Raonull an tarbh agus sniomh e d'beth an dà adharc agus thog e air a' ghille an giùlan. Rinn e port ri taobh Loch Iall, agus sheinn e airson a' cheud uair mar bha e fagus do Chaisteal Achnacara. Agus mar phill e dhachaidh, chaidh e coimhead air Donallach na Ceapach agus sheinn e am port seo dha. Dh'iarr Fear na Ceapaich am port gu bi na Fhailte aig e fhèin – agus thug Raonull dha e.²

Ronald MacDonald of Morar was on his way to visit Lochiel. The Camerons took a vicious bull from Loch Arkaig side and sent it on in front of Ronald to the River Sgaitheal. The bull appeared very fierce and Ronald said it was better to avoid him, but his gilly said, "I would not like them to say we ran away." So Ronald and the bull attacked one another in the river. Ronald killed the bull and twisted off its two horns and gave them to the lad to carry. He composed a pibroch by the side of Loch Eil and played it for the first time when he was nearing Achnacara Castle. When he returned home, he went to visit McDonald of Keppoch

An Tarbh Breac Dearg

The Red Speckled Bull

Donald MacDonald's 1826 setting, transcribed into Campbell notation

NOTE: In Campbell's manuscript, "ho" normally represents plain C. In this score, capital "H" indicates a G-E-D introduction. Bold face has been applied to all Bs to help the eye.

URLAR

Hinhodro **hio**hodro x 3 hinhodro Hodin
hiohodro hinhodro **hio**hodro **Hio**din
 Hinhodro **hio**hodro hinhodro Hodin
hiohodro hinhodro x 3 **hio**hodro **Hio**din
 Hinhodro **hio**hodro hinhodro Hodin
hiohodro **Hio**vedare chehodro **Hio**din

D. Hinhodro **hio**hodro x 3 hinhodro hinhodro
hiohodro **hio**hodro hinhodro **hio**hodro hinhodro hinhodro
hiohodro **hio**hodro x 2
 hinhodro **hio**hodro hinhodro hinhodro **hio**hodro **hio**hodro

A' CHIAD SHIUBHAL

S. Hinhodin **hio**hodin x 3 hinhodin Hodin
Hiohodin hinhodin **hio**hodin **Hio**din hinhodin **hio**hodin hinhodin Hodin
Hiohodin hinhodin x 3 **hio**hodin **Hio**din
 Hinhodin **hio**hodin hinhodin Hodin **hio**hodin hinhodin **hio**hodin **Hio**din

D. Hinhodin **hio**hodin x 3 hinhodin hinhodin
hiohodin **hio**hodin hinhodin **hio**hodin hinhodin hinhodin
hiohodin **hio**hodin x 2
 hinhodin **hio**hodin hinhodin hinhodin **hio**hodin **hio**hodin

LETH-LEAGADH (-anendo, -aoeodo) & CRUNNLUDH FOSGAILTE (-todre)

S. Hin- **hio**- x 3 hin- Hodin
hio- hin- **hio**- **Hio**din hin- **hio**- hin- Hodin
hio- hin- x 3 **hio**- **Hio**din
 hin- **hio**- hin- Hodin **hio**- hin- **hio**- **Hio**din

D. Hin- **hio**- x 3 hin- hin-
hio- **hio**- hin- **hio**- hin- hin-
hio- **hio**- x 2
 hin- **hio**- hin- hin- **hio**- **hio**-

(in Arisaig) and played him the tune. The laird of Keppoch asked if the tune could be a "Salute" to himself, and Ronald agreed.

The 'Bull' title is on record in 1814, but when Donald MacDonald first wrote the music down, in 1826, he called it *An t-Arm Breac Dearg* ("The Red Tartaned Army"). This was the battle cry of the MacQuarries of Ulva—an island on the west coast of Mull—which ex-

plains the alternative title given by General Thomason, "The MacQuarries' Gathering".

Whether the word is *Tarbh* ('Bull') or *t-Arm* ('Army'), the song associated with this pibroch sheds light on its rhythmic scansion. The positions of stresses have wandered in many tunes because pipers cannot play a note louder or quieter, only longer or shorter, or with a heavier or lighter embellishment. This can lead one to

"An Tarbh Breac Dearg" — a transcription of Allan MacDonald's interpretation on his new album "Dasturum" (siubhal.com). This score does not attempt to fix expressive details that might be unique to an individual performance. The addition of rubato in the pibroch idiom is taken for granted.

misinterpret the beat, master pipers included. As pibroch floated out of a Gaelic-speaking culture and into an English one, it gradually lost touch with the songs and *canntaireachd* that formerly guided its transmission. In this case, *an tarbh breac dearg* became *an tarbh breac dearg*. The stresses are clear when you hear it sung, but listening to the pipe they are much more ambiguous — which illustrates why the songs and the chanting are so important in pibroch teaching.

Here are the words sung by Mrs J. R. Johnston at Boisdale, Cape Breton, in 1937:

*An tarbh breac dearg,
an tarbh a mbarbh mi,
Tarbh buidhe, buidhe, buidhe,
Tarbh buidhe, buidhe a mbarbh mi.*³

*The red speckled bull,
The bull I killed,
A yellow bull,
A yellow bull I killed.*

MUSICAL STRUCTURE

This work employs an *Urlar* design found in numerous pibrochs, including “The End of the Little Bridge”. The component phrases come in two musical flavours, alternating in the following pattern:

a a A B A
b b B' A B'

The A flavour (or ‘sonority’) in “The Red Speckled Bull” contains the same ingredients as the B flavour, but in different proportions. B has a spicier effect because it contains more of the dissonant note ‘B’, which clashes against the drones on ‘A’. Pipe music is insipid on the practise chanter—the beauty of the music is supplied by the drones. The effect is a mesmerising ebb and flow of musical intensity. Example 2 shows the complete procession of interweaving sonorities, during which this ‘Woven’ design is reworked nine times.

A feature of this pibroch in the earliest source is the effective way momentum is increased in the four Doublings: each phrase B is halved in length:

A' A b A
b b A b

Asymmetrical phrases are common in Gaelic harp and vocal music. Their gradual disappearance in piping is a symptom of a changing musical landscape, hastened by the rise of light

Urlar

Urlar Doubling

Var. Singlings

Var. Doublings

Example 1. The score prepared by Barnaby Brown for the “Dastirum” recording session. Donald MacDonald’s 1826 manuscript can be viewed at www.ephemer.al.cl.cam.ac.uk/~rja14/macdonald/ (pp.258-261).

music and pipe band repertoire. The asymmetry in this work was eclipsed in the 1840s by Angus MacKay’s manuscript, and for the following 150 years, literate pipers considered reduced phrase lengths to be ‘wrong’. They were edited into uniformity in numerous works, with ponderous musical results.

NOTES

- 1 *An Gaidheal* III (1874), pp 72-75. For further tales concerning the composer, see Alexander J. Haddow (1982, reprinted 2003), *The History & Structure of Ceol Mor*, pp.78-81.
- 2 Transcribed by Colonel C. Greenhill Gardyne in a letter to John Campbell of Kilberry, kindly brought to our attention by Roderick D. Cannon. (Kilberry Papers, NLS ms 22107, ff. 5-14).
- 3 John Lorne Campbell (1999), *Songs Remembered in Exile* (revised edition), p.66.