

‘Vain, hurtful, lying, worldly tales’: Creed, belief, and practice in the life of Argyll Highlanders, in Scotland and America

Michael Newton

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There is no doubt that the vast majority of Scottish Highland immigrants to the Cape Fear valley considered themselves to be Presbyterian. A majority of these early immigrants had come from Argyll in Scotland, an area whose magnates, the Earls of Argyll, had led a vigorous movement for Presbyterianism in the mid-sixteenth century.¹

But even accepting the fact that they called themselves Presbyterians, how did they actually live and understand religious principles themselves? Was theirs an orthodox Presbyterianism such as practiced in the rest of English-speaking Britain of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and such as we would recognize today? This is the common representation in heritage texts about the Scottish immigrants which you read today,² but it is time that this assumption is called into question.

The degree to which anything seems “normal” or “standard” depends, of course, on your own perspective and the degree to which you are aware of your own ethnocentrism. It has been noted that the early form of Presbyterianism which developed in the Highlands was adapted to Gaelic cultural norms and conditions to such an extent that Lowlanders often did not did not acknowledge the Gaelic clergy as adhering to the same standards. That is to say, in the eyes of Scottish Lowlanders, many Highland Presbyterian communities retained superstitions, barbarisms and unorthodox customs.³

As neither the Highlands, nor even Argyll itself, can be considered as a homogenous region in many respects, it is not safe to apply blanket generalizations. Varying geographical situations, navigational obstacles, clan politics, economic potentials, religious traditions, and so on, come into play to make local conditions in Kintyre different from those in Canna, for example. In general, those places which were most navigationally accessible and most connected to the Lowlands were most likely to keep pace with religious reform. On the other hand, parishes felt to be currently safe from the dangers of “popery” were sometimes neglected. What we have, then, is a very complex situation.

It must also be remarked that even the non-Highland Presbyterian communities in North Carolina had no small share of superstitions and customs originating in pre-Christian times. Looking through the Frank Brown Collection of Folklore (collected in North Carolina in the early 20th

¹ Meyer 1961, pp. 112-113; MacDonald 2000, p. 148; Dawson 1994, 236, 247-8.

² Ray 2001, pp. 48-9; Newton 2001, pp. 16-17.

³ Dawson 1994.

century), one can see material about witches, charms, death omens, fertility rituals, and so on. These kinds of beliefs were (and still are) common throughout Europe and Africa and are similar to such an extent that it is practically impossible to determine the province of any particular item. Folklore and superstition can arise and adapt quickly: there are items in this collection regarding cars and photographs, for example, which were clearly not imported from any “Old Country.” But the point that I wish to make is that a body of such belief can co-exist, if sometimes rather uncomfortably, with formal, institutionalized religion.

We should make the distinction, as have recent historians of the Reformation in the British Isles, between the “confessional” role of religion and the role of religion as a “discipline.” In a confessional sense, religious affiliation is a means of expressing or shaping a community’s identity, ultimately politicizing ethnicity by relating religious affiliation to formal institutions of the state. Quite independent of this, religion can also be a discipline, that is, a prescribed set of practices and behavior.⁴

While there were still signs of Catholic sympathies even among some members of the Campbells in the 1700s,⁵ there is little doubt that the majority of the people of Argyll had accepted the Presbyterian form of the Protestant church in a “confessional” sense. That is to say, they considered themselves to be members of the Presbyterian kirk and to owe their allegiance to that religious institution. It does not necessarily follow, however, that everyone strictly observed the religious discipline of the Presbyterian kirk or even understood the theological revolution it brought in any detail.

It is my goal, in this paper, to examine the differences that likely existed between Presbyterianism as a confession and as a discipline in the Highland community. By looking for the inconsistencies and violations of the norms imposed from above we can have a fuller idea of how common people actually understood and practiced their religious convictions. We should not assume that the way in which Presbyterianism was prescribed accurately described what was always happening in the hearts and minds of its flocks.

The majority of Highland immigrants to the Cape Fear valley came between 1739 and 1776, mostly from Argyll (but others from Sutherland, Skye and elsewhere). Thus, in order to reconstruct some of the aspects of the Cape Fear Highland community, I will be using evidence from Argyll from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century, from other regions of Scotland from which Cape Fear immigrants came, from the Cape Fear itself, and from Argyll immigrants who came to other parts of North America. There are precious few documents with details of this nature, but remnants of Gaelic oral tradition provide us with valuable clues that can augment other sorts of evidence to form a fuller picture of Highland religious life.

The Role of the Gaelic Elite

It was the duty of the elite to ensure that “believers” conformed to prescribed practices. The Earl of Argyll spearheaded the campaign for religious reform in the Highlands by both attacking the icons of Catholicism and by supporting the development of the Highland Protestant church, especially religious materials adapted to Highland life. The first book printed in any Celtic

⁴ *C.f.* Bradshaw 1998.

⁵ *C.f.* Fiona Macdonald 1995.

language was the translation of the *Book of Common Order*, put into the high-register Common Gaelic of the Gaelic literati in 1567.

When examining contemporary documents, one must be aware and suspicious of the agenda of the author. Writers sometimes emphasize their success in converting Gaels in order to justify their means or to satisfy the queries of their superiors and patrons. At other times they emphasize the “papist” threat in order to garner more support for their enterprises, or excuse their ineffectiveness by blaming navigational limitations and obdurate congregations. One must carefully research local conditions to determine how accurate their claims and statements were.

As the primary patrons of the church in Argyll, the Campbell chieftains assumed leadership in religion analogous to that of a traditional warrior and magnate. The literary conventions of Gaelic clan poetry were directly translated to the context of church benefactors. Gillespuig Caimbeul, for example, the 9th Earl of Argyll, who was beheaded in 1685, is praised in an elegy to him as the primary patron of the church, which is now vulnerable without his support:

*Có chumas còir ris an Eaglais?
Dh’fhàs i dorcha;
No chumas suas ar luchd teagaisg
Ris na borbaibh?*

*Có chumas an creideamh cathardha
Suas gu treòrach
Is nach d’fhuair Gille-easpuig cead èisdeachd
An taic còrach?⁶*

Who will defend the church
She has grown dark;
Who will support our teachers
Against the barbarians?

Who will support the civilized creed
With leadership
Now that Gilleaspuig has not had the chance to be heard
Supporting truth.

Operating in a kin-based society, it was essential for the Reformation in the Highlands to draw the support of the traditional elite so that they could validate its values and translate its implications. Indeed, there is ample evidence that the old Gaelic order of poets, physicians, musicians, and so on, did become the new clergy advancing the progress of Protestantism in the Highlands.⁷

There are, however, interesting exceptions to this general pattern of acceptance and support. The MacLachlans of Kilbride were members of the clergy in pre-Reformation Argyll and seem to have been closely related to a medical family who had served the Campbells of Argyll. As

⁶ Watson 1959, lines 4632-4639.

⁷ Dawson 1994, p. 237.

expected, they continued to enter the orders of the kirk and one member of the family was ordered by the Synod of Argyll to minister to the Covenanting forces in 1645.⁸

Despite this, by the death of Cromwell in 1658 their religious allegiances show ambiguity. The head of the family composed a poem on the leveling power of death, and does not shed any tears for the 'Protector.' The MacLachlans remained Episcopalian after the Revolution Settlement of 1689-90.⁹ John MacLachlan composed a poetic celebration of the birth of Prince Charles Edward Stewart (1720) in expectation of the fulfillment of prophecy that the true king would return and his restoration would bring prosperity and peace to his kingdom.¹⁰

Despite their Episcopalianism and Jacobite leanings, the MacLachlans of Kilbride retained their status and position in Highland society, and even expected support from the Campbells of Argyll when asked for. This should remind us that we cannot assume that Presbyterianism retained a hegemonic hold on the elite or commoners of Argyll, and that Highland society was flexible enough to allow for such non-conformity.¹¹

I would warn against assuming that the common folk of Argyll always submissively accepted and adopted the Presbyterian faith when it was initially offered to them. The people of Eigg and Canna called Protestantism on the island of Rum *creideamh a' bhàta bhuidhe* ('the religion of the yellow stick'). In the early eighteenth century the laird of Rum, Hector MacLean, had become a Protestant and wanted his tenants to follow suit, but they continued to go to Mass (encouraged by his own Catholic sister!). One Sunday, he picked up a stick and knocked one of them on the head and drove the others to the kirk. They obliged and converted, although the inhabitants of nearby Eigg and Canna remained Catholic, despite the presence of a Protestant church!¹²

The Highlands and Islands were notoriously difficult landscapes for travelers in earlier times, and the understaffed church had inevitable challenges in reaching everybody and keeping them fully up to date and in line with Protestant progress. If we are to believe him, Neil Campbell, minister of Jura from 1703 to 1757, was discouraged from his duty by the intractable nature of the parishioners. Given the number of Cape Fear Highlanders who seem to have connections to Jura, his testimony should be of interest. At a disposition at Tarbert on August 5, 1727 he was asked why

all the time of his being minister of Jura and Colonsay he never did administer the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper; to which he answered that he was discouraged from attempting such a work in regard he found little appearance of the reality of Religion amongst them, and that he has no constitute eldership in his parish.¹³

⁸ Bannerman 1977, pp. 7, 10.

⁹ Bannerman 1977, pp. 9-11.

¹⁰ Campbell 1937, pp. 2-7.

¹¹ Bannerman 1977, p. 12.

¹² Johnson and Boswell 1996, p. 112. The same story is given in Margaret McKay 1980, p. 197.

¹³ Youngson 2001, p. 200.

The insufficient number of Gaelic-speaking ministers was another limitation in the administration of the kirk. The synods of Argyll and Glenelg complained in 1755 to the Scottish General Assembly about “the distressed Situation of their Bounds by the want of Preachers having the Irish [i.e., Gaelic] language.”¹⁴

Even more damning were the observations of Rev. Dr. John Walker, who was sent by the General Assembly to assess the state of the kirk in the Highlands in 1765. He claimed that, despite the efforts of the government and the Church of Scotland to promote Protestantism among the Gaels, “the Popish religion is visibly on the increase.” This was due, he claimed, to the excessive size of parishes, the spiritual ignorance of the Highlanders, and the missionary work by Catholic priests. “In some parts of the Highlands, the inhabitants have quitted the Protestant Religion [...] merely by being left destitute of the ministry and assistance of the Protestant Clergy.” Highlanders were easy prey for Catholicism, he maintained, because they lacked proper education and because they held excessive veneration for their ancestors and tradition, which were “powerful Arguments, of which, the Priests never fail to make proper use, and are very successful ones, in persuading them to return to the Superstitions of the Church of Rome.”¹⁵ While Walker’s comments may be exaggerated and may not be as applicable to Argyll as other parts of the Highlands and Islands, I do believe that they are nonetheless relevant to understanding Highland mentality.

The clergy of the Established Church were initially men from the upper ranks of Gaelic society (particularly the tacksmen class) whose worldliness and predisposition for self-advancement was proverbial.¹⁶ The Evangelical Movement brought about a “cosmological revolution in Gaelic society,”¹⁷ a reorientation of values and beliefs that accompanied the first major Clearances in the Highlands (1782-1846). Since landlords, chiefs and estate managers turned their backs on the tenantry, so did the lower orders respond to this betrayal in kind. The Evangelical Movement, generally led by laymen (*na Daoine* in Gaelic), rather than the upper echelons of Gaelic society who had previously guided affairs of church and state, enabled this grass-roots rejection of the traditional leadership to be given religious expression. It was during this period that Protestantism in the sense of a discipline had its greatest effect and impact on Highland society.

There are many examples in Gaelic oral tradition demonstrating latent resentment towards the unchecked power and financial self-interest of the clergy of the Established church.¹⁸ Captain Simon Fraser provided the melody for a song entitled *Coma Leam am Ministear* (‘I don’t care about the minister’) in his 1816 collection of Highland music. Although he neglected to provide the words, he does include the following comment:

The Highlanders, it would seem, were as much inclined as others to resist the authority assumed by the clergy, in extorting confessions, and venting public reproofs, &c, as the words

¹⁴ Clyde 1995, p. 60.

¹⁵ Clyde 1995, pp. 60-1.

¹⁶ MacInnes 1982, pp. 232-6; 1989, pp. 384-5.

¹⁷ MacInnes 1989, p. 383.

¹⁸ C.f. MacInnes 1982, pp. 233-5.

to this air appear to intimate, and they felt particularly sore upon this point, if the clergyman was a worthless person himself.¹⁹

Lest one think that such attitudes did not extend into Argyll, there is the example of the song *Am Ministèir 's Am Bàillidh*. Although it continued to be sung until quite recently, it was first written down no later than 1770 and the dialect of this version demonstrates that it was recorded and probably composed in Argyll. It is a severe indictment of the two main authority figures of Highland life, the minister and the bailiff. The chorus and last verse of the song are:

*Am Ministèir 's am Bàillidh,
Am Bàillidh 's am Ministèir,
Ga cruaidh leam reachd a' Bhàillidh
Se shàraich mi am Ministèir.*

*Gun cuir an Rìgh do'n dùthaich
Gu'r n-ùnnsaigh òrdugh 'n tighearna
'S gun caisgeadh sin am Bàillidh
'S gun caisg am Bàs am Ministèir.²⁰*

The Minister and the Bailiff
The Bailiff and the Minister
Although I find the Bailiff's order tough
It is the Minister who has vexed me.

The King will his order
To us in this country –
May that put a stop to the Bailiff
And may Death put a stop to the Minister.

While such anecdotes do not refute the denominational affiliation of Highlanders, they do illustrate how class tensions in Gaelic society could be expressed in terms of religious offices.

Myth and Legend

Carswell's Gaelic version of the *Book of Common Order* has a famous statement in the introduction, decrying the primacy of secular literature in Gaelic society:

And great is the blindness and darkness of sin and ignorance and of the mind among composers and writers and patrons of Gaelic, in that they prefer and are accustomed to maintain and improve vain hurtful lying worldly tales composed about the Tuatha Dé Danann, and about the sons of Milesius, and about the heroes and Fionn mac Cumhaill and his warriors.²¹

¹⁹ Fraser 1816, p. 102, note 42.

²⁰ Thomson 1992, pp. 126-7.

²¹ Thomson 1970, p. 179.

This statement was especially aimed at the learned classes, for the elite were much taken to enumerating among their ancestors mythic figures that were the staple of this secular literature, some of them with pagan associations. The Tuatha Dé Danann were essentially the pre-Christian Celtic gods made into literary figures. They were, according to legend, conquered by the sons of Milesius (who were said to be the ancestors of the Gael). The Fianna were warriors of Fionn mac Cumhaill akin to the knights of King Arthur, protecting Scotland and Ireland against foreign invasion. While lordly patrons supported the development of this body of literature, they were also highly popular among the uneducated people as songs and folktales. Religious reformers such as Carswell did not necessarily seek to destroy secular literature altogether, but to ensure that religious matters had the highest priority among the patrons of Gaelic arts and letters.

There is evidence that some ministers – particularly in the nineteenth century – were indeed very harsh in their decrees against this native literature. During the eighteenth century, however, and well beyond that, there is every indication that this corpus flourished in Argyll despite the disapproval of the church.

Maighstir Seathan MacLean was a senior member of the Presbytery of Mull and was ordained for the parish of Kilninian and Kilmore in Mull after a stint at Glasgow University. Notwithstanding this, he was a noted authority on Gaelic tradition and met the Welsh pioneer of Celtic scholarship, Edward Lhuyd, during his Highland tour in 1699 or 1700.²²

MacLean composed a very interesting ode to Lhuyd and his work in regaining prestige for the ancient Celtic languages. The entire poem is an important statement about the changing fate of Gaelic in Scotland, beginning by recounting the legendary ancestors of the Gaels, the Milesians:

*Air teachd on Spáin, do shliochd an Gháoidheil ghlais
'sdo shliochd na Míligh 'nfhine nach budh tais;
Budh mhór a nscleó 'sgach fód air cruas a nlánn
Air Fil' gheachd fós, 's air fóghlum nach budh ghánn.*²³

When the descendents of Gaedheal Glas and of Milesius –
No faint-hearted race – came from Spain
There was much talk in every land about the harshness of their blades
And about poetry too, and learning, which was not in short supply.

He soon goes on to praise Saints Patrick and Columba as champions of the Gaelic language and culture:

*Si labhair Padric 'nnínse Fail na Riogh
'san faighe caomhsin, Colum náomhtha 'n I.*

It (was Gaelic) that Patrick spoke in Inse Fáil (Ireland) of the Kings
As did that gentle prophet, the holy Columba, in Iona.

²² Ó Baoill 1979, pp. lxii-lxix.

²³ Ó Baoill 1979, pp. 100-1.

This poem indicates that Maighstir Seathan's sense of ethnicity as a Gael and as a defender of the language of the Highlands did not conflict with his religious convictions. Protestant ministers were, indeed, some of the most arduous workers in the cause of Gaelic in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially during the "salvage operations" on the oral tradition initiated by the Ossianic controversy. Interest in Gaelic antiquarianism remained an abiding passion for many ministers, and "while Gaelic society was still relatively unbroken, even clergymen of intense personal devotion [...] gave the secular arts encouragement and respect."²⁴

The Rev. Archibald MacColl, minister of Tiree, stated in a letter on November 3, 1783, that he owned texts containing much esoteric antiquarian lore of this nature: "I was not able to write the history of the Tuath de Dannuin, as I had not got my book in time from Kilmaluag. It was rather incorrect, but will send you it as soon as I can compare with other copies."²⁵

These fabulous characters continued to appear in Gaelic poetry as well. A good example is from an elegy to MacAllister of Loup in Kintyre, probably from the early 1700s. This example is particularly relevant given that members of this family actually went to North Carolina c. 1760.²⁶ After mentioning Milesius as an ancestor, the poet invokes tree symbolism and draws in more mythical ancestral figures:

*An crann as dìrich r'a sheanchas
On a shìolaich e an Albainn:
Mac Gille-Bhrìde nan Garbhchrìoch
Cholla is Chuinn rìogha Banbha
De'n treubh rìoghail sin Eireamhoin
Leis an do chiosaichte Tuath Danmhainn²⁷*

The most erect branch to recount
Since it was planted in Scotland:
Mac Gille-Bhrìde (i.e., Somerled) of the Rough Bounds
Of Colla and of Conn, Kings of Ireland
Of that royal race of Eremon
Who conquered the Tuath De Dannan.

Although the Tuath De Dannan did not prove to be hardy survivors in Gaelic oral tradition, suffice it to say that there are a handful of other examples of their appearance in materials in Argyll centuries after the Book of Common Order was supposed to have banished them.

The Fianna, however, were too well rooted in Gaelic tradition to make an easy exit. Even though they engaged in worldly delights with great zeal, and even had explicit pagan overtones, memory of their exploits were retained in Argyll into the twentieth century. Patrick Campbell, an Argyll man who traveled to North America in 1791, records the enthusiasm of Gaels for this native oral literature in the mid-eighteenth century:

²⁴ MacInnes 1982, p. 234.

²⁵ Watson 1959, p. 307.

²⁶ Fowler 1986, p. 37.

²⁷ Watson 1959, lines 4498-4503.

It was customary in the corner of the country where I was born, when the people assembled on any public occasion, particularly at late-wakes, to place their best historian in some conspicuous and central place, where he could best be heard in the house, but more frequently in a barn, where the corpse was kept; and after they were tired of playing games and tricks peculiar to that country, in which all the strength, alertness, and dexterity, were exerted to their utmost, the best orator began and continued till day-light, repeating Ossian's poems, and recounting the achievements of his race, which exalted their minds and ideas to perfect enthusiasm. I myself, when a boy, was present on many of these occasions, and I well remember that I never observed a sermon by the greatest devotee, or any other discourse, picked up with half the avidity that the young people did these poems; and I have different times gone on a Saturday evening from school eight or ten miles off, to a friend's house to hear them repeated, and to learn them.²⁸

It is quite significant that he explicitly states that the Gaels' love of these secular traditions, decried by the church some two centuries previous, was still greater than their love of their ministers' sermons. A similar remark was made about the people of Skye before the advent of the Evangelical Movement in 1805:

Gross ignorance of spiritual matters abounded among the inhabitants, ignorance of this kind is invariably accompanied with debasing superstition: and so it was in Skye. [...] Even on the Sabbath evenings they would group together for this purpose [Fenian tales and Gaelic poetry], and for other amusements quite unlawful on that day.²⁹

We must be mindful, of course, of the aims of the authors of such material when we read it, for they may be exaggerating conditions in order to garner support for their employment, or they may be indulging in ethnocentrism and cultural bigotry by interpreting all local traditions as survivals of paganism. Even in 1827, an Evangelical leader in Skye expressed his distress that the "great mass" of the people of the island "still remain ignorant and unconcerned about their everlasting interests." Funerals, for example, were still rowdy affairs accompanied by fighting, drinking, and pipe music: "If true religion had made any considerable progress among them, these heathenish practices would have been banished from these parishes."³⁰ The people of Skye themselves would not have been likely to see such customs as heathenish, but as normal social customs that did not conflict with their faith as Protestants.

I have thus far been unable to find any trace of Fenian legendary material in the Carolinas, raising the question as to how long it might have survived in oral tradition. By way of comparison, Ossianic material survived in Nova Scotia into the late twentieth century, allowing it to be recorded by folklorists. The whole issue is clouded by the influence of Macpherson's *Ossian*, which was very popular in America, especially in the South.³¹

²⁸ Campbell 1937, pp. 176.

²⁹ Quoted in Clyde 1995, pp. 82-3.

³⁰ Quoted in Clyde 1995, p. 84.

³¹ *c.f.* Bold 2001.

Unfortunately, neither a fondness for Ossian nor any particular stance on the Ossianic controversy indicates a familiarity with Fenian material in the original Gaelic. Mr. Charles Stewart of South Carolina contributed a letter in 1887 arguing for the authenticity of Macpherson's Ossian and against the criticism of John Francis Campbell of Islay, but does not indicate what knowledge of Gaelic or Ossian he had.³² Until some new sources are discovered, we can only speculate on the decline of such fundamental genres in Gaelic oral tradition in the Highland immigrant community.

A word or two should be mentioned about the old Celtic saints. They were not merely intermediaries between humankind and God, they were also characters of legend, endorsers of local holy sites, pioneers of Gaelic cultural expansion, and founders of families. Because of the way in which they were integrated into oral literature, genealogy, and the landscape, it was hard to eradicate them and reverence for them entirely from Gaelic culture.

For example, there was a rhyme current in Knapdale in the late eighteenth century that connects saints with particular clans:

Colman Eala, Clann Goiridh; Bearach, Clann Mhurchaidh;
Mac Chormaig, Clann Nèill; Martainn, Clann Donnchaidh.³³

I would assume that this special association between the saint and the clan made each of these holy men a special protector of that family, or perhaps its founder, though I don't have explicit evidence to this effect.

Customs and Superstitions

It has already been noted that many of the Highlanders, while nominally Protestant, were in places remote and inaccessible, and that they did not always receive the attention of their ministers which the Synod expected. This allowed customs, beliefs and values contrary to orthodox Protestantism to endure much longer than the kirk might have liked. While still in the Small Isles of the Inner Hebrides, Samuel Johnson noted:

If we had travelled with more leisure, it had not been fit to have neglected the Popish islands. Popery is favourable to ceremony; and among ignorant nations, ceremony is the only preservative of tradition. Since protestantism was extended to the savage parts of Scotland, it has perhaps been one of the chief labours of the Ministers to abolish stated observances, because they continued the remembrance of the former religion.³⁴

Thomas Pennant similarly remarks just a few years earlier:

³² *The Scottish-American Journal* March 23, 1887.

³³ *Old Statistical Account for Scotland*, vol. 19, p. 318. Note that I have corrected the Gaelic spelling from the original source.

³⁴ Johnson and Boswell 1996, p. 112.

The Protestant natives of many of the isles observe Yule and Pasch, or Christmas and Easter; which among rigid Presbyterians is esteemed so horrid a superstition, that I have heard of a minister who underwent a censure for having a goose to dinner on Christmas day.³⁵

Given that even a minister was found guilty of breaking with orthodoxy, we thus might surmise that the first generation of immigrants to America did not always follow strict Presbyterian guidelines. The comments of the minister of Tiree in the 1790s are similarly relevant as to the survival of old phrases and ideas, and the influence of the nobility in inculcating Protestant manners and customs:

The common people are not very attentive to the ordinances of religion, but are now reforming, as the gentlemen shew them a good example. They still retain some Roman Catholic sayings, prayers, and oaths, as expletives; such as 'Dias Muire let', i.e. God and Mary be with you. 'Air Muire,' swearing by Mary, &c.³⁶

It was not just the Hebrides that were criticized for a lack of religious observance and uniformity. Rev. John Smith, the minister of Campbeltown, complained in the 1790s of the lack of religiosity among the common folk in the very modern and industrious heart of Campbell territory:

One circumstance in the general character of the lower class of people, both in town and country, according to the complaint and experience of their clergy, consists in the little attention paid to every thing beyond their worldly interests, and a woeful ignorance in matters of religion; though, in other respects, they are abundantly intelligent; which may be ascribed partly to two causes, operating generally over the whole kingdom; namely, neglect in giving a religious education to young people; the principal care, which occupies the attention of masters and parents, being only to qualify them for business; - and, again, to a more than usual neglect in attending public worship, which is no less necessary, than the early installing of good principles; the temper and conduct of men, being at least as much regulated by habit as by principle. But it is not to these general causes, that the evil, complained of here, is to be chiefly attributed, but to the want of schools in the country; to the poverty and mode of living of the generality of the inhabitants in the town; the extent of the parish; and to the want of access to public worship and instruction, occasioned by the ruinous state of the established churches, which, for 25 years past, have been alternately unfit for the public exercise of devotion.³⁷

I am unsure of the cause of people's supposed lack of enthusiasm for church. It could simply be that the expectations of Rev. Smith and his peers were higher than their predecessors. Still, evidence such as this should caution us against assuming too much about the piety of the masses.

Despite the much-lauded Norse heritage of the Highlanders of the west coast, until the nineteenth century, the common people were neither acquainted with nor comfortable with sea travel. A

³⁵ Pennant 1998, p. 274.

³⁶ *Old Statistical Account for Scotland*, vol. 10, p. 413.

³⁷ *Old Statistical Account for Scotland*, vol. 10, pp. 560-1.

march-tune commemorating the departure of Highlanders for America was entitled *Tha an cuan a' cur eagal air Clann nan Gàidheal* ('The Ocean frightens the Gaelic people').³⁸

A number of emigration songs during this era supplicate God for his protection during the dangerous crossing. A song composed for a voyage from Sutherland to the Cape Fear, probably between 1768 and 1771, contains the entreaty:

*'S e mo bharail air na càirdean
Tha 'n tràthsa fada uainn
Gun dean Dia an libhrigeadh
Bho chumhachd gaoith us cuain.*³⁹

It is my expectation
For distant kinfolk
That God will deliver them
From the forces of wind and ocean.

The Christian language of salvation and redemption pervades this song. Not all texts composed for this occasion are as orthodox, however. One immigrant to the Argyll Colony, Dugald MacPharlain, went so far as to resort to calling upon older names for protection before embarking on his voyage circa 1750. As deciphered by Ronald Black of Edinburgh University, the charm seems to read (in translation):

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. "The Nines." This is a charm for every part that St. Columba uttered, and he performed nine great arcane miracles that gave substance to these words on the little world and on the big world and on the Universe so that the nine mountains and our nine glens nor the nine slender fairy paths that are at peace to over yonder, until Christ lifts from you, Iesu Domine, every evil and every sickness and every jealousy, and may God and St. Columba be with you.⁴⁰

This charm looks no different from anything to be found from much earlier time periods. It asks Scotland's primary Gaelic saint, Columba, for protection, and although it does start with an invocation of the Trinity, it also mentions the fairies! Dugald seems to want to cover all the bases, just in case.

Similarly, the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell, writing in 1874, records that magical cures were not uncommon in the Highlands of Argyll at that time:

'Wise people' are resorted to for the cure of obscure ailments by many of whom such folly might be little suspected. Not above five years ago the daughter of a dairy farmer in Cowal came to Ardnamurchan, a distance of above 100 miles, to obtain from a man of reputed skill a charm to turn aside the misfortunes and maladies by which her father's dairy was afflicted. She went home happy in the possession of a bottle of water, over which some magic words

³⁸ MacDonald 1895, p. 113.

³⁹ Macdonell 1982, p. 26.

⁴⁰ Kelly 1998, p. 137. I have made some slight changes to the translation.

had been muttered. Occasional newspaper paragraphs show that the practice is not extinct in England or the south of Scotland.⁴¹

The supernatural beings which haunted the Highlands are legion, and tales were collected from Argyll about them throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We might ask, how many of these beings (or, at least, beliefs about them) crossed over to America? Documentation is slim, but there are interesting clues. There are several stories collected in Scotland about people who traveled to America and expected to escape the harassment of supernatural beings, only to find that their unworldly tormentors had accomplished the journey as well.

I have not found any evidence of traditions from North Carolina about supernatural beings whose origins are in the Scottish Highlands, but I have no doubt that they must have existed, at least among the first generation of immigrants. I have found, however, an example of Highland belief brought to another area of America by Argyll Highlanders. A correspondent (named only as 'R. M.')

wrote from New York:

In olden times the superstitious notion was quite common in Scotland that most families had attendant familiar spirits, which from generation to generation appeared as harbingers of approaching good and evil events. The presence commonly appeared to the head of the family [...]

The grandmother of the writer of this believed in these familiar spirits. She was a native of Argyllshire, and was named Brown. Two familiars attended her family; one came with good, the other with bad, news. [...]

I wonder, Mr. Editor, to what extent this belief in family familiars prevails among Scotsmen in America. That it does prevail to some extent, I know; for in a recent conversation with a friend upon the subject, he informed me that a brother Scot, a Highlander, and a man of wealth and prominence in New England, was a firm believer in this old superstition.⁴²

Christianity is itself a belief system predicated upon supernatural phenomena, and it was often easier to find ways of accommodating pre-Christian beliefs than to destroy them altogether. There are many spiritual practices and customs in Christianity that are not easily differentiated from pre-Christian ones, and pre-existing supernatural phenomena have often been explained within a Christian framework.

The belief in second-sight, for example, can be readily equated with the God-given gift of prophecy, and holy people from St. Columba in the sixth century to Highland ministers in the nineteenth century were said to have access to such powers. It is not surprising, then, that numerous anecdotes about the second-sight survived in North Carolina to be recorded in the Angus McLean manuscript.⁴³

⁴¹ J. G. Campbell 1902, pp. 55-6.

⁴² *The Scottish-American Journal* January 24, 1878.

⁴³ Angus McLean 1993, pp. 363-4.

Music and Dance

Music, song and dance were nearly ubiquitous in old Highland life, even among the Moderate (pre-Evangelical) ministers of the Established Church.⁴⁴ Although the Evangelical Movement tended to express disdain for such worldly pleasure, the bulk of the emigration from Argyll to the Cape Fear happened before this religious reformation was a potent force in Highland society. At least some forms of music, song, and dance continued in Argyll and elsewhere long afterward, and the retention of the Gaelic arts in the immigrant communities of eastern Canada is becoming proverbial. How can we explain their strange disappearance in Cape Fear?

Music and dance were undoubtedly an active part of social life in Argyll in the late eighteenth century. Bagpiping in particular remained strong well into the nineteenth century. Patrick Campbell, when remarking on the dancing customs of Native Americans, noted that they would not have likely allowed the flirtation that held in the Highlands: “I told Captain Brant that in my country at all country weddings and frolics, it was customary to kiss both before and after every dance.”⁴⁵

The Highland love of music was, of course, given religious expression, particularly in the singing of the Psalms. The Reverend Hugh McAden paid a visit to the property of Alexander McKay on the Cape Fear in 1756, noting of the congregation that they were “the poorest singers I ever heard in all my life.” One writer has claimed that this was because the people had not “had the opportunity of attending a religious service since 1739,”⁴⁶ but I rather doubt that this is relevant for a people for whom music was a constant element in life. I believe that he is commenting upon the Highland style of presenting the Psalms, a musical tradition that can sound quite discordant to anyone not used to it. It is also interesting that he depicts the people as anything but pious, upright Christians, as they “stayed around the house all night and indulged in drinking and profane language, in spite of his remonstrances, and almost entirely prevented his rest.”⁴⁷

Some of the families who came to the Cape Fear were noted for their musical skills and knowledge. The MacCrimmons, for example, were the foremost piping dynasty in Scotland, and some of them went to North Carolina. Domhnall Ruadh MacCrimmon, piper to MacLeod of Dunvegan and possibly the last tutor in the piping dynasty to teach at the Skye college, left for America in about 1774. While he went on to join the British army and was killed in Long Island in 1782, he must not have been the only skilled piper in the area.⁴⁸

Malcolm Fowler’s book *Valley of the Scots* provides an account of another piper, Archie Buie (“the Blind Piper of the Valley of the Scots”), who is supposed to have arrived in 1753.⁴⁹ This section of his book is interesting, but he obviously romanticized and elaborated on sources that he

⁴⁴ MacInnes 1982, p. 234. 236.

⁴⁵ Campbell 1937, p. 169.

⁴⁶ Fowler 1986, p. 31.

⁴⁷ Foote 1846, p. 171.

⁴⁸ Kelly 1998, pp. 272-3; Gibson 1998, pp. 98-9, 126-7.

⁴⁹ Fowler 1986, Chapter 10.

unfortunately does not reveal to us. It is implied that Archie was a native of Skye and he is depicted as a wanderer and resistant to a settled life, which was a common enough trait of Gaelic musicians.

The best example that the song tradition survived in the Carolinas, and perhaps some vestige of the dance tradition, is the Gaelic four-stanza love poem found by William Caudill and believed to have been composed by the Confederate soldier John MacLean about the time of the American Civil War.⁵⁰ MacLean's family emigrated from the Ashpole Church area of Robeson County, North Carolina, in the 1820s to Thomas County, Georgia. He seems to have been a second- or third-generation American. His community was obviously engaged in the Gaelic oral tradition, given that he must have learned his poetic skills orally and that the poem was meant to be performed publicly in a *cèilidh* setting. The song mentions the Reel of Tulloch, but it is hard to be sure from this literary allusion that the dance was still actively performed, rather than simply remembered as a proof of personal skill and grace.

In his travelogue written in America in 1869, the Rev. David MacRae took particular interest in the Highland settlements in North Carolina. He, too, must have expected a livelier musical tradition, for he notes:

Highland songs and dances were once common; but "Dixie's Land" is better known now than the pibroch, and the Church has done a great deal to put dancing down, though its zeal has often been more than its success.

One staunch Highlander, of the name of McGregor, who was a great dancer, kept himself, during the New Year festivities, in a chronic state of alcoholic excitement, and out in an appearance wherever there was hope of a reel or strathspey. He was remonstrated with, and at last threatened with the Session. "You may Sayshun, and you may Sayshun," cried the obdurate Celt, "but when New Year comes McGregor is on the floor."⁵¹

MacGregor's final comment is a verbal act of defiance against the church session, which must have frowned upon his frivolity.

The Kellys' observations on the religious fervor of the revival movements among the communities in the Carolinas are surely significant in explaining the demise of Gaelic secular music and dance traditions. These religious "awakenings" occurred in various places along the Atlantic seaboard between the 1780s and the 1830s, and seem to have been particularly powerful in the Highland communities in the Carolinas in the 1830s.⁵² Judging by its general tendencies in Scotland and America, revivalist religion probably contributed to the repression of dance and secular music, and the "sinful" activities that accompanied them.⁵³

⁵⁰ Caudill and Parsons 1995.

⁵¹ MacRae 1952, p. 254. An attendee at the 2003 Symposium mentioned several other relevant documentary sources pertaining to McGregor and dance tradition after my talk, but failed to pass the references on to me. I hope that he will make these available to me so that I can make a more accurate assessment of these issues.

⁵² Kelly 1998, pp. 102-4.

⁵³ Kelly 1998, p. 118.

Note, however, that while this had been the aim of church reform for centuries, it was only in certain contexts and historical circumstances that the kirk actually acquired enough power and authority to overcome the weight of secular society. It appears that Gaelic society in America was transformed by the religious environment it found here, and rendered it weak in its transmission of musical tradition. Even beyond this, the loss of the Gaelic language would have meant that a large part of the musical repertoire would have been lost.

Conclusions

Perhaps this paper has raised more questions than it has answered, but that is as it should be. Scottish Highlanders in eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century Argyll and the Cape Fear valley were neither pagans, nor were they dull, docile, orthodox Presbyterians. They were, rather, a people in transition, an intelligent and complex community who were attempting to incorporate religion in their lives according to their contemporary circumstances, rather than being simply subservient to the clergy.

The campaign spearheaded by the Campbells since the sixteenth century to win the Highlands for Protestantism certainly gave religion an increasingly important role in reorienting political allegiances and in the expression of ethnic identity. To put it in technical jargon, Protestantism took on confessional significance in transforming Highland society from the sixteenth century onwards. As evidence in this paper suggests, however, the actual reformation of Gaelic spiritual practices and beliefs in Argyll and beyond was a much more gradual process, not at all complete when the migration to America began.

Presbyterians in the Scottish Highlands were already under pressure to iron out local “eccentricities” so that their religious traditions could appear to match those in the Lowlands. After they immigrated to the Cape Fear region, they began to be assimilated by the Anglophones dominant in the area, thus further losing those peculiarly distinctive aspects of Highland Presbyterianism, especially those tied to the Gaelic language itself.

I can’t help but think that removing Highlanders from the context of the Scottish landscape itself facilitated their detachment from older beliefs and encouraged the acceptance of the orthodox religion. The Highlands were a kind of living repository of rituals and beliefs accumulated over millennia.⁵⁴ As the French traveler Necker de Saussure observed in 1807:

Apart from superstitions widespread amongst all the European nations, the Scottish Highlanders have many particular to themselves. They have inherited from the Catholic religion a kind of veneration for places formerly consecrated by this cult, and they go on pilgrimages to certain springs and to certain caves which still carry the names of men and women saints, to find the cures for their ills there.⁵⁵

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⁵⁴ See Chapter 7 of my *Handbook of the Scottish Gaelic World*.

⁵⁵ Campbell 2000, p. 133.

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