A History of Pipe Bands in Northern Ireland

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Introduction
This research started as an ambition by the Royal Scottish Pipe Band Association (RSPBA) branch in Northern Ireland to investigate two important aspects of the branch and the associated Scottish highland bagpipe tradition in Northern Ireland. First, the RSPBA seeks to develop knowledge on the history of the branch from its inception post second World War, through the difficult and complex period in Northern Ireland known as ‘The Troubles’, to the ‘post-conflict’ peace agreement period in the twenty first century. Second, the organisation hopes to develop an ethnographic overview of the present day living tradition of highland bagpipe performances linked or associated to the branch in Northern Ireland.

This document deals primarily with the first of these objectives. However, early into the research we realised that uncovering the dates and details of organisation formations would only provide a limited picture of those early years of the RSPBA in Northern Ireland. Nothing from such information could explain the equally if not far more interesting question, why? Why was it that pipe bands sought to organise an institution focused on the celebration, promotion, and preservation of the highland bagpipe tradition in Northern Ireland? Why, in the context of an already established and large flute band tradition, did the pipe band tradition flourish to such heights? Since its inception this project has evolved into an ever more dynamic venture whereby the formation of the Northern Ireland Pipe Band League, and the subsequent Northern Ireland branch of the Scottish Pipe Band Association, is presented in tandem with results from interviews and focus group meetings exploring questions on the initial attraction and popularity of the pipe bands. The insights garnered from these discussions demonstrate the high levels of aesthetic pleasure found amongst musicians performing in Northern Ireland pipe bands from after the Second World War, and subsequently explain why it was the leading musicians and supporters of pipe bands felt the need to advance the
tradition to a more autonomous position i.e. separate from the flute and accordion band competition circuit.

This project is, however, fraught with difficulty as although recent decades have seen the pipe band community form organisations in the preservation and promotion of a rich musical heritage, records remain sparse and difficult to locate. The scarcity of records is not due to any form of limited capacity within these organisations. After all these organisations were, in essence, part-time voluntary organisations based within community where the primary objective was to perform and promote music, not record music (or the organisation of it) for future reference.

Similarly, bands that existed prior to the formation of these organisations have left little or no trace in the form of tangible documentation of their existence. Yet, they remain ever prominent in the memories of those who learned, performed, and appreciate the art of music within these groups in years gone by. It is these collections of memories that form the basis of what is an oral history and ethnographic project in ethnomusicology.

As such, this work is best considered to be a rolling and active project rather than a static completed document. Through publication of this paper – our initial and early work in this area – we hope members and supporters of the highland bagpipe tradition in Northern Ireland will be encouraged contact the Northern Ireland branch of the RSPBA to contribute their wealth of knowledge to the project, and offer corrections on findings in this current work. It is also important to note that this project is not a means of asserting the RSPBA as the sole and exclusively authority on the highland bagpipe tradition in the community. We hope this project will be regarded as one for all parts of our society to contribute to, learn from, and feel ownership of. We hope that a momentum of appreciation for our shared musical heritage will lead to the further popularisation of our rich tradition of pipe music in Northern Ireland.
This work also seeks to avoid reinventing research, such as that carried out by Cannon (1988) and others relating to either the history, development, or current status of the pipe band tradition in Scotland, which, through the seventeenth century Ulster plantations and the subsequent pre-eminence of Scottish and Scots-Irish/Ulster-Scots heritage (Marianne, 2001), traditions, and identity in Ulster ensured the suitability and popularity of the highland bagpipes and the snare drum as a musical ensemble in the region later to become Northern Ireland. This work also, clearly and unambiguously, considers and places the highland bagpipe tradition in Northern Ireland as part of the wider Western militaristic marching tradition of music. Granted, in the context of Northern Ireland, parading is a precarious and difficult term with the media-scape annually dominated during the summer months with concerns of violence surrounding a minority of parades (Casserly 2014). This research seeks to assure the reader that the martial music of pipe bands in Northern Ireland is not being conflated with the music of flute, brass, and accordion bands in the region. Although some historical associations are present, it should become clear that the pipe bands and other wind bands in Northern Ireland followed divergent paths after the ending of the Second World War.

This research has already made some key findings on the history of the RSPBA Northern Ireland branch. These findings are due exclusively to the generosity of spirit of numerous figures from the highland bagpipe tradition in Northern Ireland. There are too many to give suitable thanks to individually in this brief document, but it is suffice to say without their invaluable contributions the progress made thus far would be impossible, and a list of current contributors is available in Appendix B. In certain cases participants have opted to remain anonymous, or have particular statements submitted as anonymous. For this reason certain contributions in this work are

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1 Although, as a background to the topic, this work later – and briefly – juxtaposes the development and popularity of both community and high-society marching traditions in the wider European historical context. It is this early popularisation of parading in Europe that led to its subsequent wider popularity on the fringes of the continent.
presented as such. Where direct quotes are used from participants, the date of submission of the written or spoken contribution is provided.

**Why Marching Music? Historical Trajectory**

Pipe bands in Northern Ireland hail from a diverse background, with many bands having formed in a variety of ways. Some bands developed in communities where an existing marching band already existed. In some cases evidence of parading bands can be traced back centuries. In these cases the pipe band developed as an alternative to a flute, fife, or accordion marching band. Although some of these current bands typically formed post Second World War in both urban and rural communities (Murphy, 1996), there is, however, evidence of pipe bands having formed long before the Second World War is found in the history of numerous existing pipe bands in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

The development of the marching band and parading tradition in Northern Ireland can trace its heritage to the development of parading culture throughout Europe. As noted in earlier research on parading culture in Northern Ireland, the parade tradition is moulded on the European type, an older convention with roots traced back to church and trade guild processions of the Middle-Ages (Fraser, 2000:2), where these processions displayed prestige, wealth, power, solidarity and identity for the hosts of these events. However, despite parades frequently displaying power and wealth, not all of these processions and festivals existed exclusively under the restraints of the upper echelons of society. In such scenarios the authorities and powers allowed, or rather chose to ignore, the street displays that took place even if such festivals occurred during religious holidays. This compromise “helped shape European culture for centuries” (Ehrenreicht, 2007:78) whereby communities, people from all parts of society, could be wholly involved in and enjoy a parading culture. Thus, a precedent
formed wherein parades developed into displays by the authorities, the elite, the people, and even a negotiation between all of the above.

This negotiation, or dialogue (if it can be considered such), between the authorities and the people that occurred in parades merged with the rising of the Nation-States of the Western Hemisphere in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Parades brought traditions, identity, and politics into one performance setting e.g. Bastille Day Parade in France, St. Patrick’s Day Parade in the Republic of Ireland and Independence Day in the USA. Considering this the timing of the pipe band upsurge in popularity, or revival, in the 20th century seems more than coincidental with key developments in British and Irish history. Firstly, pipe bands appeared to be forming, or re-forming, throughout Ireland in the early 20th century2. The famous Dublin based Saint Laurence O’Toole Pipe Band formed from their local Gaelic Athletic Association club in 1910, and subsequently participated in the volatile socio-political movements including the Dublin Lockout of 1913 where the “band was set upon by mounted police in Lombard Street while leading a contingent of workers on a protest rally” (Saint Laurence O’Toole Pipe Band, 2014). The band subsequently performed at funerals for prominent Irish Republicans during the War of Independence and Michael Collins’ funeral during the Civil War. It was after the Irish Civil War that the Saint Laurence O’Toole Pipe Band moved more towards an apolitical stance.

One of the leading pipe bands in Northern Ireland, the Seven Towers Pipe Band. Formed in 1926, the band formally performed publically for the first time in October 1927 for an open air ceremony at Ballymena Castle. The group, being newly formed, were photographed for an article in

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2 It must be noted that pipe bands were not exclusive in this domain, as wind instrument marching bands of various types formed throughout the whole of the island during this time, including the Kilfenora brass band (County Clare) that later became the famous céilí band, and the recently defunct Onward flute band (Belfast).
the Ballymena Observer for October 21st of that year (Seven Towers, 1986). Being addressed by a 
Samuel McCord, the ethos behind the foundation of the pipe band comes to light in his speech 
recorded for the article: bands support their community as “every man, woman, boy and girl 
requires something over and above the drudgery of everyday life” (McCord, cited in Seven Towers, 
3:1986). This perspective of bands providing meaningful and musical entertainment for their local 
community as a feature of Northern Ireland bands that continues today (Casserly, 2010).

However, why opt for pipe bands and not any other type of marching ensemble? In 
McCord’s speech before the Seven Towers Pipe Band in 1927, he refers to maintaining mutual 
respect for the already existing flute and silver bands in the Ballymena area, yet “a pipe band is 
distinct from any other” (McCord, cited in Seven Towers, 1986:3). The distinction resides in two 
areas of the pipe band ensemble: the distinctive musical sound of the pipe band, and the visual 
spectacle of their displays. Notable figure of post-Second World War pipe bands, Eddie McVeigh (see 
figure 1), is regularly quoted by participants as having argued that the tradition is the ‘finest 
spectacle of sight and sound you will find anywhere you go’ (quote given by participant on 
06/03/2014).

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3 The Seven Towers Pipe Band published a commemorative pamphlet to celebrate their 60th anniversary.
Formations, Families, and Friends
Others, like the Ballydonaghy Pipe Band⁴, formed under the auspices of fraternal and other community organisations. As was the case with the Ballydonaghy band, the organisation’s beginnings were a development over time, rather than an immediate formative event. The group initially started with only three musicians playing the highland bagpipes for LOL 351 on 12th July 1947. By 12th July 1948 the group developed into a full band with one drum major, nine highland

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⁴ The Ballydonaghy Pipe Band developed an information booklet based on the history of their group in February 1998 to commemorate their 50th anniversary.
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bagpipers, at least four snare drummers, and one bass drummer. Initially, these bands performed only for events and functions where LOL 351 was in attendance, or where the lodge sanctioned the presence and performance of the band.

Bands, at the time of their formation in the post Second World War time, bands were predominantly, if not exclusively, male. The role of women in relation to the band was to provide logistical and fund raising support through “Ladies Committees” (Ballydonaghy Pipe Band, 1998). This approach to placing women in supporting roles rather than performance roles is unsurprising considering the connection between the bands and fraternal organisations.

However, as previously referred to, not all bands formed from fraternal organisations. For example, the Cavanacarragh Pipe Band from County Fermanagh developed in the mid-1940s from the remnants of a defunct local band, the Clough Flute Band, and the nearby Tempo Silver Band (Murphy, 1996). As Kieran Murphy notes, “Some of the men thought it would be good to try something new and the idea of a pipe band was thought to be a worthy one” (Murphy, 1996:7). In circumstances where bands formed without the support of connections to local organisations, family connections within bands provided the solid foundation for these bands to both survive and grow beyond their infancy stage. In the case of the Cavancarragh Pipe Band, little more than three local families were involved in the bands early days (Murphy, 1996:9). Similarly, the Cavanaleck pipe band outside Fivemiletown, County Fermanagh, first appeared on Monday 13th July, 1959, after having reformed earlier in the year from a part-music flute band (Cavanaleck, 2002), and was formed primarily from a selection of families, including the Johnston, Funston, Williamson, and Dunwoody families.

Families continued to be an integral part of pipe bands throughout the countryside in the post-Second World War era. Notes donated to this research articulate the particulars of family
members competing side by side, including the World’s Championship in 1956, held at Balmoral in Belfast, where Pipe Major William Wood and his son competed in the Ballycoan Pipe Band, whilst four of his sons competed with a pipe band from Dromara, County Down. Similarly, five sons from the Boyce family of Saintfield, County Down, all performed and competed with pipe bands with one of the sons, Jimmy Boyce, becoming an established soloist and winning many awards.

All readings, references, ethnographic semi-structured interviews and focus groups have expressed one over-riding and unifying interpretation of the pipe bands. They provided a firm social group to their members. For many young members socialising through a pipe band was either their only, or at least their primary, leisurely and social activity. In many ways this brings the pipe bands into line with evidence derived from research amongst contemporary marching flute bands in Northern Ireland, i.e. socialising, networking, and camaraderie are prominent in the musical experience. Where pipe bands moved from this objective as the sole or primary objective appears to occur with the formation of the RSPBA Northern Ireland Branch, and a move towards an emphasis on musical sound as well as spectacle. As part of the RSPBA many bands sought to win competitions as their primary objective; although the significance of socialising, maintaining valuable and intimate connections to family and friends, was neither lost nor replaced, but merely added to as part of the pipe band experience.

For bands formed in rural areas the pipe band was an essential part of the members’ social lives. Here, weekly rehearsals were an indulgence whereby a young person could interact with friends and peers. Performances, as well as being further opportunities to mix with band mates, were equally opportunities to display their musical abilities to a wider audience granting the young, somewhat isolated rural musician, to meet others from nearby communities and those from further afield.
Although pipe bands were often formed within communities, they were not always exclusive for members of the nearest or local community, with participants of this research recalling circumstances where musicians travelled upwards of thirty eight miles in a round trip, twice weekly, in order to rehearse with their pipe band or their tutor. Sometimes these circumstances arose where a musician’s local band folded, sometimes when it amalgamated with other bands, and other times when the musician was ‘head hunted’ for their talent by another band. In the latter situation a musician might have switched their band in the hope of advancement of their performance skills.

**Contrasts and Changes post-Second World War**

In the mid-twentieth century pipe bands, a pipe band considered as excellent in standard would consist of twelve pipers, one bass drum, two tenor drums, and four side drums. Other grades were also regulated with the lowest grade allowed to compete with six pipers, one bass drum, one tenor drum, and two side drums. This is in stark contrast with current bands competing in Northern Ireland, with some bands, according to participants, marching into the performance arena with as many as twenty six pipers, four tenor drums, and a side drum corps of nine percussionists. The cost of maintaining bands were equally and significantly different from contemporary times as one participant recalled purchasing in 1968 a set of four Premier side drums and a bass drum for just over one hundred and eighty four pounds. Throughout this research participants celebrated with pride the excellence and rising standards of pipe band music in Northern Ireland, but consistently lamented what they regard as a potentially harmful trend of large bands and expensive costs in maintain a viable competitive pipe band.

Also, Belfast, the capital city of Northern Ireland, supported numerous pipe bands in the decades after the Second World War. However, as flute bands became the ever more popular type of marching band in Belfast from the 1970s onwards, the numbers of pipe bands based in Belfast
declined and dwindled. However, this project was gifted a list of highland bagpipe bands in Belfast prior to the decline which includes the following: Angelo Davidson Memorial; Balmoral highland Lassies; Beersbridge; Belfast Gasworks; Belfast Girl Piper’s; Campbell College; Carnmoney; Castleton Temperance; Clan Hamilton; Clarke Memorial; Coronation; Donegall Pass; Dr Lyttle Castlereagh; Duke of Argyll; Duke of Edinburgh; Duke of Wellington; Duke of York; Duncairn; Earl of Beconsfield; Earl of Roden; East Belfast; Falls Highland Lassies; Falls Road; Felon’s; Finaghy; Glnahirk; Henderson Memorial; HMS Caroline; Immanuel Old Boy’s; John F. Kennedy Memorial; Joseph Mc Kelvey; Kitchener Memorial; Lebanon Street; Mc Quiston Memorial; Monkstown Mossley; Mossley; North Belfast; Ormeau; Piobairi Chumaman na Meileach; Piobairi Uladh; Preston; Pride of Ulster; Pride of Ulster Junior; Prince of Wales; Rev. Milford; Robert Armstrong Memorial; Sandown; Sandy Row; Shatsbury; Shankill Armature’s; Sinclair Memorial; Sir Basil Brooke; Sir Henry Wilson; Sons of the Heather/Ligoniel Horse Kilties; St Adain’s CLB; St. Agnes; St. Elizabeth’s CLB; St. John’s; St. Malachi’s; St. Mary’s; St. Mathew’s; St. Michael’s CLB; St. Silas; St. Simon’s; Sydenham (see figure 2); Sydney Pentland Memorial; Sean Healy Memorial; Tom McWilliams; Ulster Armature’s; Walton; Willowfield; Woodvale. Seven of these bands were based in the Shankill Road area alone.
Other pipe bands in the Belfast area included groups associated to the military, such as the following: 4th NIH TA Regiment; 8th Belfast AA Regiment; 74th Engineer’s; 245 Ulster Field Regiment; 247 TA Regiment, and the QUB OTC. Boy’s Brigade pipe bands listed included: 8th Cooke Belfast; 25th Belfast (Cregagh Methodist); 29th Old Boys (Townsend); 42nd Belfast; 77th Belfast (Rosemary); 92nd Belfast (Eglantine); and the 15th Belfast (Newington).  

The Spectacle of the Pipe Band
It is clear that the pipe band in Northern Ireland was, and to a certain extant remains (albeit in a different form) a relatively popular music tradition. Previously outlined were the social reasons for why bands formed, and why musicians maintained their membership. However, this was not their only concern as pipe bands as spectacle often attracted a large number of their members. It is the visual presence of the pipe band that has allowed the tradition to navigate a neutral path through the Northern Ireland divided society of the Troubles. With the latter concern, McCord compliments

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\[5\] The list also referred to the 4th Newtownabbey, and the 10th Bangor Boy’s Brigade pipe bands.
the Seven Towers in 1927 for their “military grace”, “martial music”, and similarity to a “Highlander” (McCord, cited in Seven Towers, 1986:3). The visual representation for many pipe bands at their time of formation is equal in importance to their musical standard, as bands were advised to ensure high standards in the presentation of their uniforms and decorum in public. The expected standard warned band members to maintain a clean, un tarnished uniform as a means of becoming a Highlander; this objective being plausible “whether you are a Yankee, an Irishman, or a Scotsman” (McCord, cited in Seven Towers, 1986:3).

Evidently the mixture of Scots-Gaelic and martial display of the pipe band helps make the ensemble as a viable, if not preferable, option when local communities sought to form marching music groups after the second World War. The meaning behind these choices, and what the interpretations of these displays, is subject to further questioning in this research. In preliminary analysis we can speculate that the pipe band spectacle was an open and inviting option for marching music, as the display was both militaristic (expressing discipline) and Scottish (expressing a variety of distinctions of ‘British-ness’ and/or ‘Gaelic-ness’ or ‘Celtic-ness’ depending on the position of the observer). Through this openness of interpretation regarding the communal identity of pipe bands and their music, pipe bands became the ‘safe’ form of musical representation. It was and is a form of music without presupposed conflict, without exclusive or unambiguous connection to one side of a community divide over another.

In interviews, focus groups, and discussions throughout this research this predominant view expressed by participant was of the pipe band tradition as being one free of exclusive association with any one group made it appealing for members, viable as a sustainable tradition, and largely free from the difficulties of the conflict in Northern Ireland. Beyond these political and cultural identity concerns were the aesthetics of pipe band performance. When asked what initially attracted
members to joining pipe bands seemed to be the musical sounds emanating from the pipe bands. The contrast of what was considered as a powerful yet sweet series of sounds from the pipes, in tandem with the militaristic, disciplined rhythms of the drum corps appealed directly to the young aspiring or student musicians who were looking for opportunities to seek entertainment. Second, and most convenient for the stabilisation of the pipe band tradition, was the level of support granted to incoming members from those already in the bands. Here, younger members were taught by senior members of the band in a quasi-tutorial/apprenticeship system of learning. Others joined because other members of their family were either already members of the band, or their family held firm connections to the band⁶.

**Organisation of Competing Music**

Inevitably, and has been alluded to throughout this document, the attractiveness and subsequent popularity of the pipe band in twentieth century Northern Ireland led to a situation whereby the pipe band members sought to have more control and autonomy over the organisation of competitions for their music. Already, many southern Irish bands joined the Irish Pipe Bands Association (IPBA), whereas the northern bands maintained their connectivity with the North of Ireland Band Association. This organisation is often referred to as the Northern Ireland Bands Association by participants in this research. The prestigious regional/provincial competitions available for pipe bands to participate in were through the two major competitions organised by the North of Ireland Bands Association (NIBA) which, initially formed in 1907, accepted non-flute bands from 1909 onwards. Other dates suggested by research participants include 1911 as the first year that pipe bands joined the NIBA, later appearing at the NIBA championship in the 1920s.

⁶ In one case their grandfather was in the past a senior and significant member of the pipe band they joined.
The NIBA affiliation was later viewed after the Second World War by pipe band musicians as a limited opportunity to perform competitively with only two large competitions taking place annually. Also, with NIBA competitions taking place mostly indoors, pipe band musicians argued the full capacity of their instruments were not being appreciated within the NIBA. As one participant outlined “it soon became evident that pipe bands were more suited to playing outside on the grass, and it was decided to form a Pipe Band League which [later] met monthly in the CIYMS Hall in Belfast” (written submission on 20/03/2014).

This initial decision to start working towards a new organisation developed through conversations amongst senior pipe band musicians on Black Saturday, presumably in 1946, with the first exploratory meeting for the formation of a new Scottish Pipe Band Association taking place at a private residence in Sydenham, Belfast, in the same year. With the precedent having been already set to form a pipe band only organisation in the Irish Pipe Band Association, pipe band musicians (Sam McManus, Mickey Magee, John Drennan, Eddie McVeigh, and Tom Hart) from Northern Ireland – prior to the formation of the northern equivalent – sought to develop a collegial and collaborative approach to pipe band music and helped organise the first All-Ireland Pipe Band Championship in tandem with the newly formed southern Irish Pipe Band Association. In Belfast’s Adelphi Hotel Paddy Solan and Paedar Wallace represented the IPBA to plan the first All-Ireland competition to be held on 24th August 1946 in the Iveagh Gardens in Dublin with three grades (Junior, Intermediate, and Senior) and a total of 26 bands. The competition hosted twenty six pipe bands from across the whole of Ireland, north and south.

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7 This information is based on submission from participant on 17/06/2014, who was aged nine at the time. Although the participant is certain of the year of the first meeting to discuss the organisation, they have not expressed with certainly the year the ‘Black Saturday’ conversations took place.
The lack of competitive space for the pipe band community in Northern Ireland, particularly in the NIBA, continued to raise concerns for leading members of the tradition, not only for the inability to compete in numerous, centrally organised or sanctioned competitions, but also for concern that the standards of performance (and judges) with the NIBA competitions could not advance to the degree desired. Effectively, the members sought a thriving, pipe band focused competition circuit where judges would specialise in pipe band music, as distinct from a general awareness of martial music. Even with the 1946 Northern Ireland Pipe Band League, the organisation remained under the auspices of the NIBA with rumours abounding the prize money was not shared fairly or equally through the band types.

Thus, an association with the Scottish organisation, which had formed around 1930 (Cardwell, 1993), would eventually provide the new fledgling organisation with the educational and standard management resources required to advance the tradition according to their aspirations. The first bands cited as having expressed interest in forming the Northern Ireland branch were: Ballynahinch, Ballycoan, Sydenham, Waringsford, St Josephs Artana, 8th Belfast Memorial, Duke of York, Raffrey, Boardmills, and Rasharkin. The following officers were elected: President James A. Faulkner, Vice Chairman George Milligan, Secretary Tom Hart, Assistant Secretary George Finlay, Treasurer Arthur Nelson, N.C. Reps to Scotland Tom Hart and Arthur Nelson, Advisory Reps P.M. William Woods, and D.S. William Reynolds.

In the context of the formation of the southern based IPBA in 1945, and a highly successful All-Ireland competition in 1946, a Northern Ireland Pipe Band League formed with the “first Annual General Meeting was held on Saturday 28 October 1950, with there being a notice of motion from Ballycoan seconded by 8th Belfast that all League bands become members of the Scottish Pipe Band Association and a local branch requiring ten bands to form a membership” (20/03/2014).
By January 1951 the new organisation was already driving forward with their agenda through a formal visit from Scottish Pipe Band Association (SPBA) officials, Councillor President McLean and General Secretary Donald McIntosh. This early encounter proved highly successful with the first Ulster Pipe Band Championship organised for Saturday 5th May, 1951, in the Ballymena Showgrounds. The four grades for competition included Open, Intermediate, 2nd Grade Junior and 1st Grade Junior, making a total of 13 bands in competition. The SPBA officials, being pleased with the progress of the new branch, allocated the European Championships to Balmoral Showgrounds Belfast in 1953, followed by the World Championships in 1956 and 1962.

Throughout the 1960s the Northern Ireland branch of the SPBA continued to grow, with a total of four sections developing during this decade: Mid-Ulster, Fermanagh, Antrim, and Down. Each of the sections organised their own annual competitions and officers to ensure the effective management of the SPBA in Northern Ireland. During the early years of the organisation, structured summer schools were developed with support from the parent organisation in Glasgow to raise the profile of the pipe band music tradition in Northern Ireland, later leading to the organisation reaching the dizzying heights of one hundred bands in the branch membership. In 1980, in honour of the work of the SPBA throughout the United Kingdom, Queen Elizabeth II granted to prefix ‘Royal’ to their title in 1980.

Northern Ireland RSPBA personnel have also played an important part throughout the decades as officers of the parent association in Glasgow. Alistair Gray served as Chairman, Eddie McVeigh and Tom McCarroll served as President, whilst Kenny Crothers and Mervyn Herron both served as National Councillors for over 30 years, with Kenny Crothers also National Treasurer. The Adjudicators Panel has had a healthy and consistent representation from Northern Ireland, demonstrating not only the depth of development in the local pipe band tradition but also its ability
to be regarded as a leader in musical standards, with members including Harry Stevenson, Nat Russell, Denver Cardwell, Richard Parkes, Adrian Hoy, John Rea, Kit Reynolds, Gordon Parkes, Harry Russell, John Moles, David McConnell, Sandy Steele, Paul Turner, Ian Wood, Jim Graham, Roger Young, Alan McBride, Gloria Patterson, Alistair Patterson, Winston Pollock and Colin Moffett. However, history was to have an inevitable impact on the tradition, and although the Troubles largely overlooked the pipe band world, it did not entirely ignore it. In 1969 the annual competition in Portrush, organised by the local branch, was cancelled due to security concerns expressed by the RUC to the event organisers.

Prior to ‘The Troubles’ bands were mostly protected from sectarianism, although bands formed along traditional community lines. However, it was not a pre-requisite in pipe bands for a member of the band to be from the community the band was associated with i.e. a Roman Catholic could, and often did, join pipe bands that formed within Protestant communities. The reasons behind this vary. Often there was a lack of pipe bands associated to a particular community in the area, or, the musician was sought by the pipe band from the other community for their musical talent. Sectarianism during the conflict impacted some bands as some fraternal organisations refused to support pipe bands where a member from the other community was performing with the group. Other bands have been ridiculed by those from outside the tradition who disagree with pipe bands performing for days and events not typically associated to their tradition i.e. a Protestant pipe band performing on St. Patrick’s Day in the Republic of Ireland.

It appears now that another major concern regarding the survival and growth prospects of highland bagpipe bands in Northern Ireland is the recently changing dynamics of contemporary rural life. Young members often take lengthy breaks from their band membership to attend university. Sometimes they return to the tradition. Oftentimes they don’t. In urban areas the predominance of
marching flute bands, particularly the blood and thunder genres of flute bands, prove to be exceptionally popular with young aspiring musicians from working class areas in towns and cities like Belfast. These bands, with high membership turnover and more accessible learning techniques (Casserly 2013), show the pipe band tradition in contrast as a difficult and almost inaccessible tradition to young learner musicians. Also, in many flute bands the learner pays a nominal fee for membership, and the instruments and uniform is often supplied. For many pipe bands the member is expected to own their own set of bagpipes, making initial access to the tradition a difficult journey for the impoverished.

Despite these difficulties, the perseverance of the pipe band musicians to ensure the longevity of their tradition remains. Currently, the Northern Ireland Branch School, under Principal Winston Pollock, Convenor Darren Frew and the dedicated team of instructors, organise classes for piping, drumming and drum majors at the various venues across Ulster, namely Ballymena Primary School, Erne Integrated College Enniskillen, and Lisneal College Londonderry. By holding these classes they ensure a steady stream of younger members to safeguard the future of the pipe bands for years to come.

The Uncontested Pipe Bands
As a result of the focus on RSPBA pipe band on field competitions, pipe bands from the Northern Ireland branch rarely found themselves in a potentially politicised position. Granted, it is clear that bands were, as a consequence of their location and association, either Protestant or Catholic. It is rare that they were classified as mixed, even if the membership was mixed, as when bands were not competing in field competitions their performances were traditionally for one or another’s community celebrations i.e. they marched on St. Patrick’s Day or the Twelfth of July. Only in recent decades does it appear to have changed whereby a band could potentially, and safely without
criticism, perform for Saint Patrick’s Day and the July celebrations. However, this transition was not entirely without some limited difficulty as participants reported anecdotal stories where sectarianism impacted the pipe band tradition. In one case a band was chastised by a local fraternity for performing at a parade for the ‘other’ community. In another circumstance a pipe band was told by the fraternity that hired them to perform they could not lead the parade if a member of the ‘other’ community was present in the ranks.

Despite these difficulties, which are infrequently raised in discussions about the pipe band tradition in Northern Ireland, the RSPBA continues to promote a musical heritage for all the community of the province. However, this cross community endeavour is carried out quietly and subtly, not as a stated ambition, but rather a sub-conscious understanding and acceptance that this particularly music transcends the historical divisions of Northern Ireland. In this case an organisation with the Royal prefix to their title accepts and encourages bands from across society to join in the promotion of music. They continue to collaborate with their partner organisation based in the south of Ireland for the annual All-Ireland competition. And, lastly, they engage with schools in Northern Ireland (including integrated schools) to ensure that this music tradition does not move towards a domain of exclusivity.
References


The Seven Towers Pipe Band. 1984. *60 Years On...souvenir booklet*. Booklet produced by Seven Towers Pipe Band. Exact date unknown.
Appendix A
The Seven Towers Pipe Band. 1984. *60 Years On...souvenir booklet*. Booklet produced by Seven Towers Pipe Band. Exact date unknown. See attached PDF marked Appendix A.

Appendix B
*List of Contributors*

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