

SHINTY'S PLACE AND SPACE IN WORLD¹

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Shinty – *iomain* or *camanachd* in Scottish Gaelic - was introduced to Scotland along with Christianity and the Gaelic language nearly two thousand years ago by Irish missionaries. Indeed, it is worth noting, 1,400 years after St Columba's death, that the venerable Saint is said to have arrived on these shores as a result of a little local difficulty at an Irish hurling match.²

While shinty's place in world sport has been recognised in terms of its historical pedigree and connection with its cultural cousin of hurling in Ireland, its provenance world-wide and its significance as one of the cultural anchors which emphasised the "Scottish-ness" of Gaels forced abroad has been consistently under-estimated, if not ignored completely.

Shinty, or some similar version of stick and ball games, has been played through time virtually UK-wide, from wind-swept St Kilda to the more hospitable and gentler plains of the Scottish Borders; from the Yorkshire moors to Blackheath in London. It is a game of great antiquity. It is linked (not always with complete accuracy) to golf and ice hockey, and is also to be found in a much wider space from the plains of Montevideo in the mid-nineteenth century, to Toronto and Canada's Maritime Provinces; from the blistering heat of New Year's Day in Australia 150 years ago, to Cape Town and also the war-ravaged wastes of Europe through two World Wars.

Shinty, as with many other aspects of Highland heritage (notably the Gaelic language) has been frequently threatened: by Statute, the influence of Sabbatarianism following the Reformation, the savage dislocation of the Highland Clearances and in more modern times, by harsh economic reality and a falling birth-rate.

This paper will, in defining shinty's place and space in world sport:

- 1 Summarise the origins of the game now known as shinty
- 2 Establish its presence world-wide
- 3 Focus on its provenance in England
- 4 Re-assess shinty's "place and space in world sport".

The modern game of *camanachd* (shinty), is played to the following rules (in summary):

The field of play is rectangular, not more than 170 yards (155 metres) nor less than 140 yards (128 metres) and its breadth not more than 80 yards (73 metres) nor less than 70 yards (64 metres), with minimalist markings.

Scoring is by goals which consist of two upright posts, equidistant from the corner flags and 12 feet (3.66 metres) apart, joined by a horizontal cross-bar, 10 feet (3.05 metres) from the ground. The goal has a net attached to the uprights and cross-bars, as in Association Football.

The ball is spherical, made of cork and worsted inside, the outer cover of leather or some other approved material, not more than eight inches (20 cms) and not less than 7.5 inches (19 cms) in circumference. The weight of the ball at the start of the game should not be more than 3 ounces (85 gms) nor less than 2.5 ounces (70 gms). In previous times

balls have been made of India Rubber, wood, lemons, sheep droppings and sheep's vertebrae - basically anything which could be hit with a wide variety of curved sticks.

Players' equipment and apparel, apart from the obvious stick (known as a *caman*) is also minimal: shin guards and strips basically, safety being paramount. Helmets and face-guards are now more common, *à la* hurling and cricket, and helmets are compulsory for certain younger players.

The *caman* must conform to the following standard: the head must not be of a size larger than can pass through a ring with a diameter of 2.5 inches (6.3 cms); no plates, screws, or metal in any form shall be attached to or form part of the *caman*. (The Irish game of hurling allows such attachments.) A player whose *caman* is broken during a game may play the ball before obtaining a replacement *caman*, providing the broken *caman* is not deemed dangerous to himself or another player.

Origins

There is no doubt that shinty (or more accurately, some early form of the stick and ball game) was played in pagan times, but whether it was, as has been suggested³ "a recognisable relic of a very ancient, pagan, magical fertility rite", I doubt, although the folk-lore collector Reverend Robert C. MacLagan, in somewhat bizarre fashion, also postulated some phallic significance in relation to the shinty stick.⁴

As Anne Ross details in her important *The Pagan Celts*,⁵ board games were very popular amongst the ancient Celts, and no doubt helped to pass the long evenings. Field games were also encouraged. Cù Chulainn, the greatest of all the Irish heroes, excelled at such games. Originally known as Sètanta, he won his name by driving a ball through the foaming mouth of a dog, forcing the brute's entrails through the other end. This prodigious feat, we are told in *Tàin Bo Cuailgne* (The Cattle Raid of Cooley), ensured that the women of Ulster went forth to meet him "stark naked" and bared their breasts to him. Our hero was, according to the tale, "placed in three vats of water to quench the ardour of his wrath".⁶

Hurling, shinty's sporting and cultural cousin, has such a distant ancestry that it is impossible to pin down its origins. According to the evidence of Irish myth and legend, the game had its devoted followers more than a thousand years before Christ. The first recorded reference dates to the Battle of Moytura, near Cong, County Mayo, in 1272 BC between the native Fir Bolg and the invading Tuatha De Danann, who were demanding half the country. When the request was refused, a battle was inevitable. While the sides were preparing for the fray it was agreed to have a hurling contest between twenty-seven of the best players from each side. The match began. Many a blow was, predictably, dealt on legs and arms "till their bones were broken and bruised and they fell outstretched on the turf and the match ended." The Fir Bolg won, fell upon their opponents, and then slew them.⁷ There was also Sgàthach, the warrior queen who trained the Irish heroes in the south end of the Isle of Skye. The heroes arrived, with three bounds across the Irish Sea, to perform their legendary feats; tales which are brilliantly satirised by Flann O'Brien in his *Snàmh dà eun* ("At-Swim-Two-Birds").

We know that the Tailtean Games, said to be the oldest recorded organised sports in the world, were held in Ireland as far back as approximately 1800BC, and that they went on until 1180AD. Stick and ball games would have been central to their performance. But even before that, as Benny Peiser points out, the Egyptians are to be found playing games with what appear to be sticks and balls some 4,000 years ago.⁸ The earliest historical evidence regarding the stick and ball games of the Gael is to be found in an Irish document dating to the twelfth century - a version of the deeds of the ubiquitous Cù Chulainn, where the word *caman* is clearly seen.⁹

The game at home

In Scottish terms, the earliest written reference to shinty or "schynnie" is in 1589, in the Kirk Session Records of Glasgow.¹⁰ The Club of True Highlanders regarded shinty as being:

undoubtedly the oldest known Keltic sport or pastime. The game is also called Cluich bhall, shinnie, shinty, bandy, hurling, hockey, and at one time was a universal and favourite game of the whole of Keltland....The origin of this game is lost in the midst of ages... indeed, it is said, and, *no doubt, with great truth*, that the game of *Camanachd*, or *club playing*, was introduced into the Green Isle by the immediate descendants of Noah. On such authority we may rationally conclude that it was played by Noah himself; and if by Noah, in all probability by Adam and his sons.¹¹

The Book of the Club of True Highlanders is a remarkable piece of work published by the Society of True Highlanders in 1881. The Club's aims, according to one shinty historian, were:

*buried beneath an ant-heap of balderdash about supporting the "Dress, Language, Music and Characteristics of our illustrious and ancient race in the Highlands and Isles of Scotland." ... They held three-day hunts, Gothic theatricals, balls and Highland Games at which cows were first felled with a hammer, then torn to pieces and barbecued.*¹²

Edited by C. MacIntyre North, the book (published in two volumes) is a most fascinating text relating to several (sometimes completely spurious) aspects of Highland and Gaelic culture and is apparently based on material allegedly gathered in the 1870s.¹³

The term "shinty" itself requires some explanation. *Iomain*, or more latterly *camanachd*, were the Gaelic terms, meaning *driving*. This is "An English View of Shinty" in 1893, the year the game took on the first vestiges of its organised form, with the establishment of the ruling body, the Camanachd Association:

*Camanachd is not an orchid; nor is it a new biological eccentricity, nor the latest freak of pathological nomenclature. It is a recreation. In Scotland there are three games which can best claim to be native to the soil - golf, curling and shinty and the greatest of these is shinty, whereof the Gaelic name is camanachd....*¹⁴

"Shinty"(or its variants shindy, shinnie, shindig etc), however, has proved much more contentious, and the general view is that it is derived from the Gaelic *sinteag* - a "leap, bound". *Shinnie*, in fact is held to be the older of the two (around 1600) with *shintie* replacing it some 100 years later. According to the sport's first real historian, Father Ninian MacDonald, OSB:

Hurling or hurley became the English equivalent used in Ireland (which must be carefully distinguished from Hurling as practised in Cornwall). In Cheshire we find "baddin," in Lincolnshire "crabsow," in Fifeshire "carrick," in Dorsetshire "scrush," and in Gloucestershire "not" (from the knotty piece of wood used as a ball). In other districts we find "chinnup, camp, crabsowl, clubby, humney, shinnup, shinney-law, shinney," and so on.¹⁵

Shinty is still, strictly, an amateur game. While sponsorship may be a relatively modern concept in its delivery of support to the sport, it is clear that the patronage offered by the lairds and gentry was well established across the Highlands, and indeed Scotland, in the nineteenth century. Sir Aeneas MacKintosh described the Camack or Shinty matches as follows, in his "Notes descriptive and Historical, Principally relating to the Parish of Moy in Strathdearn", published in 1892.

Playing at Shiney is thus performed - an equal number of men drawn up on opposite sides, having clubs in their hands, each party has a goal, and which party drives a wooden ball to their adversaries (sic) goal, wins the game, which is rewarded by a

share of a cask of whiskey, on which both parties get drunk. This game is often played upon the ice, by one parish against another, when they come to blows if intoxicated, the players (sic) legs being frequently broke, may give it the name of Shiney.¹⁶

Given the presence of the *aqua vitae*, it should be no surprise that there was no event of greater importance in connection with the celebration of the advent of the New Year in the Highlands than the New Year's Day Shinty Match. Alexander Campbell, in his epic poem *The Grampian's Desolate* (1804), added the following notes to his original work as a footnote:

A cask of whisky strong, the victor's prize:

The rural sports and pastimes of the Gael are fast hastening into desuetude. Of the very few of those gymnastic exercises that still remain, wrestling, putting the stone, and shinny, or shinty (creatan) are practised occasionally. The latter exercise, of which I have attempted a description, is by far the most active and arduous of our rural pastimes. *Shinny* is a game performed with a wooden ball, and sticks or clubs crooked at one of the extremities, for the purpose of hitting the ball with more address and certainty.¹⁷

It was usual in the Highlands to have the principal games of shinty at New Year or Old New Year, although other festivals were also marked in other areas of the country as well. These contests were often between two districts or parishes, with no limit to the numbers taking part. Players arrived and departed at will, and often matches continued from the forenoon until darkness fell.

There was a tradition in Beauly near Inverness that prizes often took the form of "right" or "monopoly" of raiding nearby farmers' stocks or produce without opposition. The practice was continued in some Highland areas in the early 1900s by younger boys where the major prize for opposing shinty teams was the right to raid, without permission, the best farm's vegetable plot at Halloween.¹⁸ More conventionally, however, side bets were often placed by lairds, and the games held, (most usually without rules, but sometimes with a specific caveat), were no more than a means of settling old (or new) scores.

Mrs M MacLeod Banks, in her *British Calendar Customs*, drew heavily on the work of Ninian MacDonald and MacLagan. She introduces shinty thus:

Shinty. The chief game in Scotland at New Year was Shinty, or Shinny, the second probably the oldest form of the name. Played with a bent or curved stick, the *caman*, its Gaelic name was *Camanachd*, shortened to *Cammock*; it was also known as *Iomain*, driving, though this name applied as well to football, or any game in which a ball was driven forward.¹⁹

Mrs Banks then goes on to reproduce some valuable source material relating to the games in the oral tradition and especially the Tales, and the rules, particularly the selection of the captains. She concludes by advising that "A piper played before and after the game... At the end the chief, or laird, gave a dinner, or, failing him, a number were entertained at the house of a mutual friend. In the evening a ball was given, open to all."²⁰

One of the best sources for determining shinty's "place and space" is the dictionary. For example, the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*:

schinnie/shinnie/shiny/shinye, n,

(schinnie,)/shinnie/ shiny/ shinye, n, [Obscure. Cf. Gaelic *sinteag* a skip, a pace, later Scots *shinty* (1769) the game, (1773) the stick, 18th century English *shinney* (1794) the stick.] A game played with a stick curved at one end like a hockey stick and used for striking a ball, also, the stick itself. [With respect to the Kirk-yard, that ther be no

playing at golf, carrict, shinnie (Liber Coll. Glasgow, p. lxxviii shinny], in the High Kirk, or Kirjk-yard, or Blackfriar Kirk yeard, either Sunday or week day; 1589 Glasgow Kirk S. 16 Oct. in Wodrow Life of Mr David Weems 14 in Biog. Coll. II (Maitland Club 1845).] The bairnes of France have the exercise of the tap, the pery, the cleking, and (instead of our gouf, which they know not) they have shinyes; 1665-7 Lauder Journal, 125, He did transub Himself to ball, the Parliament to club, Which will him holl when right teased at ane blow Or els Sir Patrick will be the shinnie goe; c 1690 Bk. Pasquils 181.²¹

In Jamieson's *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* (1825) shinty is to be found sandwiched between "Shinnock" and "Shiolag":

SHINNOCK, *s.* The same with shinty, a game, Loth.

SHINTY, *s.* 1. A game in which bats, somewhat resembling a golf-club, are used.

In London this game is called *hockey*. It seems to be the same which is designed *not* in Gloucester.; the name being, borrowed from the ball, which is "made of a *knotty* piece of wood;" Gl. Grose. The game is also called *Cammon*. V. CAMMOCK.²²

Perhaps more surprisingly however, the *English Dialect Dictionary* (EDD) records the following: *shinham* in the north of England, *shinnins* and *shinnop* in Yorkshire, and *shinny* and *shinty* in the north of England generally, and as far south as Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire and Gloucestershire. *EDD* mentions shinty being played in Workington in Cumberland as late as 1888, when two boys were fined for playing the game in the street and a third "was let off, having been well thrashed by his parent". Finally, *EDD* records shinnop, as well as meaning the ball-and-stick game "to trip any one up on the ice" in the East Riding of Yorkshire, possibly indicating the game having been played there on ice.²³

The Oban Times of 8 January, 1870 devoted eighteen column inches to an article on "New Year Customs in the West Highlands". As many as forty people with sticks would do the Calluinn round (as it was known in Gaelic) it states, the sticks being used as "joists and supports" eventually! The grand finale, the article tells us, is the shinty match - "usually about ten a.m. on New Year's morning":

Every able-bodied male inhabitant, from both sides of the country, for a distance of many miles each way, meet on a common near the centre of the parish, where a great match of playing the club is held between the two sides of the district... I have seen as many as 2,000 men engaged in these contests, besides a vast number of visitors. Usually the stakes were simply the honour of either half of the district, but occasionally a hogs-head of whiskey was given to the winners by the proprietor. This liberality led to such scenes of drinking, and sometimes of fighting, that in recent years he wisely refrained from a present in the train of which were consequences so disagreeable.

Even then, however, shinty was of much wider interest than just being the expression of some local conflict, or a landlord's patronage. The view from outside - and it is an important one for a number of reasons - was as follows in *The Penny Magazine* of 31 January 1835. Produced by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, the Magazine's cover provides us with a useful visual representation of shinty as it was perceived at the time.²⁴

In the Highlands of Scotland it is customary for persons to amuse themselves, in the winter season, with a game which is called "shinty". This sport has a considerable resemblance to that which is denominated "hurling" in England, and which Strutt describes under that name. The shinty is played with a small hard ball, which is generally made of wood, and each player is furnished with a curved stick somewhat resembling that which is used by golf players... Large parties assemble during Christmas holidays, one parish sometimes making a match against another. In the struggles between the contending

players many hard blows are given, and more frequently a shin is broken, or by rarer chance some more serious accident may occur.

This account of shinty may be short on specifics in terms of location and identity, but the formula used in the description of play is important because of the detail it reveals of the game - its rules and rationale. The social aspect and the standing of the individuals taking part is also significant, as well as its confirmation that the game was played as part of the Christmas festival.

It should be noted that there was a very active shinty scene south of Hadrian's Wall in the nineteenth century. The pages of the *Highlander* newspaper, particularly in the late 1870s and early 1880s, read more an account of English Premier league football matches with details of games and frequent references to Birmingham, Manchester Camanachd, Old Trafford, the Highland Camanachd Club of London, Cottonopolis, Bolton, Nottingham Forest and Stamford Bridge, to name but a few.

The London Camanachd Club had direct links through preceding clubs in the metropolis to the Highland Camanachd Club of London, which was formed in March 1878. This was not, however, the first club established in England. That singular honour belongs to Cottonopolis, Manchester, the Camanachd Club formed prior to December, 1875. The Manchester Camanachd Club held interclub matches on Christmas and New Year's Days and they also played a 30-a-side game against a local Scottish organisation, the Manchester and Salford Caledonian Club, on Christmas Day, 1877. The Bolton Caledonian Camanachd Club was formed on 19 December 1877, with more than 50 members. The first meeting between the clubs did not take place till 8 February 1879 at Old Trafford, Manchester, where the home team was victorious. Several matches between the two clubs were played in the following years including one at Bolton for the benefit of the local infirmary. It is not certain when the Manchester and Bolton clubs ceased playing shinty. The last known contest between the two was in April 1881.²⁵

The *Highlander* is not the only valuable newspaper though. The *Inverness Courier* of 23 June 1841 tells us that:

Highlanders in London were greatly interested in a shinty match organised by the committee of a body which called itself 'The Society of True Highlanders'. The match took place in Copenhagen Fields, 'an extent of rich meadow land lying on the outskirts of Islington.' There was much enthusiasm and keenly contested games. It is said that before the gathering half the glens of Lochaber had been ransacked for shinty clubs.

The game abroad

The feverish activity which characterises shinty in Scotland and England in the mid-nineteenth century was matched in the farthest-flung corners of the globe - eventually in a fantasy world of Celtic twilight, as we read in the *Inverness Courier* of 13 July 1842, relating an account of a match on 4 April, on the plains of Montevideo:

After sides were called, and a few other preliminaries arranged, playing commenced, and was carried on with great spirit till four P.M., when the players sat down on the grass and partook of an *asado de carvo con cuero* (beef roasted with the hide on,) and plenty of Ferintosh (Aldourie and Brackla being scarce.)²⁶

Dancing then followed, and much else by way of celebration. Similar scenes were also enacted from the Cape of Good Hope to Toronto in Canada, to New York, where a team was formed in 1903.²⁷ In the summer of 1995, Effie Rankine of North Uist, who has stayed in Mabou, Cape Breton Island since the 1970s, recited for me a version of the poem "Tiugainn a dh'iomain" ("Come and play shinty") her mother had learned in North Uist. She also recited this short New Year verse from Mabou itself, which shows how the tradition survived on the other side of the Atlantic.

Duan Challuinn
Oidhche Chullainn, Challainn, chruaidh
Thàinig mi le'm dhuan gu tigh
Mis' Alasdair Mac Iain Mhòir
Gabhaidh mi mòran leis a mhòran
Gabhaidh mi an t-ìm leis an aran
Agus gabhaidh mi an t-aran leis fhèin
A'chailleach chòsagach, chòsagach
Na gearr d' òrdag
leig a staigh mi.²⁸

This verse was originally recited for Effie by Johnnie White of Cape Mabou and related to the turn of the century. When Effie asked about the tradition of celebrating New Year, Johnnie replied "*S e na camain a bh'aca a' bualadh nan tighean*" - "it was shinty sticks they had hitting the houses."

This remarkable transference and survival of the oral tradition is explained by the dislocation of thousands of people from the Highlands to the far sides of the world during the infamous Highland Clearances. The songs and stories which survived (and *sustained*) the mass movement of Highland people in the nineteenth century, (particularly during the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s), are the main source for the delineation of one of the most interesting aspects of shinty's space and place. Canada has been reasonably well dealt with, although there is still scope for further work on the survival of the customs and pastimes in Alba Nuadh (Nova Scotia) in particular.²⁹

However, one of the standard works on the history of Scots in Australia states:

Some other Scottish sports have not taken on at all. (Curling requires frozen lakes, which are in short supply in this country. Shinty is very similar to the Irish game of hurling, and some Highland shinty players may have formed the kindred game in Australia, *but shinty itself is unknown.*)³⁰

This is a complete mis-representation of the facts and a distortion of what actually happened. The earliest evidence I have so far located of shinty actually being played in Australia is in the *Port Phillip Patriot* of 6 January 1842.

Shinty. On New Year's Day a splendid game at the good old Scotch game of shinty came off on Mr Donald McLean's farm on the Merri Creek. About twenty stalwart Highlanders ranged on either side, and the game was so keenly contested that after a four hours' struggle under the broiling heat of the mid-day sun the parties were fain to withdraw the game, neither party being able to gain the victory.

Two year's earlier, the journal of the Argyllshire farmer Niel Black reveals that the "broiling heat" may, in fact, have been too much for the Gaels who wished to indulge in their traditional New Year pastime:

The mode in which the New Year was welcomed out here was to keep up a constant firing but was not troubled with first footing. We had a quiet New Year, different indeed from any I had ever seen before. I dined with Eddington but there was no party in either place. It would have been hard work here to play the Shinty or dance in the heat we have had at present but I thought it might be done.³¹

Perhaps the most convincing evidence of shinty's translation to Australia is a water-colour painting ascribed to the Scot John Rae in 1842. The scene depicted appears to show shinty being played. It is one of a series painted by Rae, a Scotsman who

apparently arrived in Sydney in December 1839, a year after the "St George", the vessel which left Oban in 1838, packed with Badenoch folk, and for which the Gaelic song "Guma Slàn do na fearaibh"³² was composed. *The Oxford Companion to Australian Sport*³³ captions the same picture: "Hockey is supposedly depicted in this 1842 sketch by John Rae entitled *A Game like Hockey in Hyde Park, Sydney*."

Further evidence of shinty in Australia at this time is to be found in the *Hamilton Spectator*, in the poem "Shinty", by Ossian Macpherson³⁴ who apparently wrote it when in London in 1842. It is remarkable for its similarity to other poems of the period, including material from *Leabhar Comunn nam Fìor Ghàidheal - The Book of the Club of True Highlanders*.

Compare, for example, this from Macpherson in Australia, drawing on his poem, "Shinty", commending the establishment of a Caledonian Society to Scots of the neighbourhood:

Get up, up, ilk Hielan' wight:
The magpie coos, the morn is bright:
Seize the camac: grasp it tight,
An hasten awa' to shinty.
Then drain the quaich, fill again,
Loudly blaw the martial strain,
An' welcome gie wi' micht an' main,
To guid auld Hielan' shinty.
with this, from *The Book of the Club of True Highlanders*:
Deil tak' the glass! Gie me a capp,
That I may drink a heart drap
In health to ilka honest chap
Wha loses that game of shinty.³⁵

It comes as no surprise then when one finds that in Geelong, Victoria, a society was established by Highlanders to maintain the culture and traditions of their people. "Comunn na Feinne" (The Fingalian Society) lasted from the 1850s to the 1940s and featured shinty at its New Year gatherings, particularly in its early years.³⁶

To go back 300 years on the American Continent, it is worth noting in terms of place and space that the Araucanians took horses from the Spaniards in the mid-1500s and moved frequently between Argentina and Chile, fighting the Spaniards on the coast and fleeing to the mountains for refuge. Secure in their mountain retreats, we know the Araucanians found time for sport and recreation.³⁷

Returning to Canada, the exact degree to which shinty influenced the development of stick sports there is one which is the matter of some debate, albeit that the argument is very much peripheral to the main difference of opinion about who, exactly, "invented" the game which is now called "ice hockey". There can be little doubt but that shinty was a contributory influence to the development of the sport: the indigenous Indian population were playing games called "shiney" in hundreds of different forms across the continent before the Gaels arrived.³⁸

It is well known too that when settlers from Wester Ross arrived in Pictou, Nova Scotia in 1773, aboard the vessel "Hector", there was a piper in the company.³⁹ Whether the assembled masses had taken time to pack shinty sticks amongst what little possessions they could take with them is extremely unlikely. There is little doubt, however, that once they got to Canada, they took up where they left off at home in many respects. Their sports and pastimes were just about all they had in the face of extreme adversity as the store of songs which has survived shows. It appears, however, that the people adapted as soon and

as best they could in trying circumstances. Indeed, in the face of difficulties visited on them by certain members of the clergy, notably Reverend Norman MacLeod⁴⁰, the horrors of the natural environment may have paled into insignificance.

This song was written by Alexander MacDonald, (Am Painter Mòr - the Big Painter), son of Donald and Sarah MacDonald, who was born in 1829, and died in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, in April 1910. Big Donald moved from Lochaber in Scotland to Mabou c.1816. The song details how "young people's past still seem to be largely the traditional ones - music and song at waulkings and weddings, the celebration of Calluinn and shinty playing

Bu chridheil ar duan
An uair na Callainn,
'S mo luaidh na fir nach 'eil beò,
A bheireadh dhuinn duais
Bho fhuaim nan caman
Gu luath 's a' ghloin' air a' bhòrd.⁴¹

Finally, in relation to shinty in Canada, I refer to a book called *Games and Songs of American Children*. It was printed originally in Toronto in 1883 and re-printed again in 1963. Item number No 136 is "Hockey".

This sport is also called Shinny. The ball is struck on the ground with a bent stick, the object being to drive it over the enemy's line. The game is much played on the ice, as has been the case from the oldest times in the North; for this is doubtless a descendant of the games with bat and ball described in Icelandic Sagas. The name of "Bat and Ball", also given to this sport, indicates that in many districts, this was the usual way of playing ball with the bat.

Captain Archibald MacRa Chisholm of Strathglass, first Chief of the Camanachd Association claimed that he had played shinty in North America "with our cousins and relations in Canada, during the winter, on skates, with a splendid field of ice, 300 miles long, 200 miles wide, and the ice at least 10 feet thick".⁴² If the game we know today as shinty had penetrated the Canadian consciousness to the extent just detailed, then it can safely be assumed that the ancient and noble game is very much part of the developing history of sport in Canada.

Survival

One of the most famous early depictions of shinty play is a painting called *A Highland Landscape with a Game of Shinty*. It is believed to have been painted around 1840, and was attributed to D. Cuncliffe (1826-55) and A. Smith of Mauchline (1840) by Father Ninian MacDonald in the frontispiece of his famous book *Shinty*. The painting contains all the elements of the (fictional) Highland scene of the time, with a shinty match the central action, pipers, dancers and Lairds set in an idyllic and completely over-romanticised Highland Glen.

Shinty is often regarded as having retreated to the Gàidhealtachd (Highlands of Scotland) by the nineteenth century. From there it was re-introduced to the Lowlands by people who were encouraged or forced to move south. One example is the children at New Lanark, and this also appears to be the explanation for an active shinty club in the Vale of Leven in the 1870s; certainly it was Highlanders in exile who played in the matches which were held in Glasgow and Edinburgh (and much further afield) from the 1870s onwards.

It has not hitherto been properly recognised, however, that a continuous tradition exists for shinty south of the Highland Line until the second half of the nineteenth century. There is extensive evidence of shinty as a children's game in the Lowlands,

particularly in and around Edinburgh until about 1850. In 1816 members of the Burgess Golfing Society complained that their play on Bruntsfield Links was being made hazardous by shinty players.⁴³

There is also a significant corps of *visual* evidence confirming shinty's existence in the city at the same point. David Octavius Hill's A view of Edinburgh from the north of Castle Rock, showing the Castle, the New Town and the Firth of Forth, dates to approximately 1860.⁴⁴ Hill's panoramic vista of Edinburgh shows a group of youths playing shinty at the west end of Princes Street Gardens. There is also Charles Altamont Doyle's *Duddingston Loch* painting (1876), which clearly shows shinty play in Edinburgh.⁴⁵

It was in situations such as these no doubt that the law was most often invoked against shinty and other sports. Shinty, as with many other aspects of Highland heritage, and the Gaelic language in particular, has been frequently threatened by Royal edicts against popular and "uncontrollable" games, as well as by the Sabbatarianism which followed the Reformation, outlawing the playing of sports on the day of rest, and the rapid erosion of the Highland way of life. Clearly this intervention often came on an official basis, with policemen having an obvious role in stopping shinty. The County Police orders for Edinburghshire in 1842 included the following:

Many complaints having been made of boys playing at "shinty or football" upon the public roads, the Constable is directed to put an immediate stop to it.⁴⁶

The law was invoked against shinty in Oban, Argyllshire, in 1843:

And be it Enacted, That every person shall be liable to a penalty of not more than forty shillings who on any road, bridge, or quay within the limits of this Act shall commit any of the following offences (that is to say,)

Every person who shall fly any kite, or play at shinty, foot-ball, or other game, to the annoyance of passengers.⁴⁷

The value of statutory evidence lies, of course, in its authenticity, as opposed to the bogus nature of much contained in, for example, the *Book of the Club of True Highlanders*. That charge cannot be levelled against another volume which greatly enhances our knowledge of the "intriguing web with wayward strands" that is shinty.⁴⁸

One of the finest historical expositions of shinty, its time, place and context, as well as Gaelic vocabulary, is by the famous scholar Alexander MacBain of Inverness. However, the man to whom we owe the greatest debt of all was Alexander Littlejohn, a Londoner of Scottish origins who donated the fabulous Littlejohn trophy and Album to the University of Aberdeen, the trophy for play between student teams from the Scottish universities.⁴⁹

Conclusion

A series of hugely interesting and memorable exhibitions matches 100 years ago were the immediate catalyst leading to the formation of the Camanachd Association, shinty's ruling body. The game has developed from a series of loosely organised clubs and structures, into a *reasonably* efficiently run and progressive organisation with around forty clubs of varying strengths competing on a regular basis, commanding national media attention and significant sponsorship.

Shinty has approximately 2,000 players and between 2,500 and 3,000 members of the Camanachd Association, with teams playing at various levels from primary school age to senior (adult). The Association has a turn-over of approximately £100,000 annually. In Ireland, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), a multi-million pound business, administers an organisation of over 200,000 players - a ratio of 100 hurlers for every shinty player. However, Scotland remain unbeaten by

Ireland in the four full international matches in the compromise game of shinty/hurling played between 1993 and 1996, including an historic first ever win on Irish soil by the Scots at that fourth meeting.

Shinty in its organised form has come a long way since it fought to survive in the Glens of the Highlands and much further afield, in public parks as far from its main heartland as Wimbledon, Manchester, and even in Aberdeen, where the North of Spey Club, met on the links on 1 January 1849, "for conducting the long established Celtic game".

The game is being dragged, often kicking and screaming, into the twenty-first century - round a roundabout, rather than at the cross-roads, I would venture. Developments such as Team Sport Scotland's initiative see shinty once again making inroads into many of the urban areas where, 100 years ago, it was played with gusto.

The sport's dilemma is, however, whether to promote the ancient sport of the Gael as a modern, vibrant game, or to preserve it as a quaint aspect of Highland culture. It has, after all, survived the ravages of two World Wars and has also seen off the many economic disasters which have beset the Highlands; decisions taken by executives of multi-national oil companies in the US, or Admirals of their navy to set sail for home. The falling birth-rate and school closures are but another historical affliction affecting the game in rural areas.

Shinty's players and administrators regard their sport, quite rightly in my view, as one of the greatest games in the world. For life-force and continuing success, however, the game must continue to aspire to skill and spectacle at the highest level. Shinty is also one of Scotland's truly national - indeed *international* - assets, which has an important, and hitherto largely under-valued pedigree and provenance world-wide. For too long now historians, and particularly sports historians, have at best under-valued, at worst ignored, shinty's rightful place and space in world sport.

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Notes and References

¹ This paper draws on research conducted in pursuance of a PhD at Aberdeen University. I am indebted to my supervisor Prof Allan I MacInnes and many others who have helped at various points, including Dr Cliff Cumming, Australia, Prof Grant Jarvie, Stirling, Prof John Reid, St Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, John Burnett, National Museums of Scotland and Jack Richmond, Newtonmore.

² MacLennan, 1995, pp. 26-41.

³ Letter to the *West Highland Free Press*, 13 January 1989.

⁴ R.C MacLagan, Occasional Papers c.1910, in National Library of Scotland, H.2.86.1349, article on Hogmanay, pp. 3-42.

⁵ Ross, 1970, pp. 95-97.

⁶ O Rahilly, 1967, pp. 162, 170-171.

⁷ The source for this account is *Leabhar na Nuachongbhalaor the Book of Leinster*, the compilation of which began in 1152, more than two thousand years after the event described. See King, 1996, p.1).

⁸ BSSH Annual Conference, Keele, 1997.

⁹ MacLennan, 1995, p.42.

¹⁰ Kirk Session Records, Glasgow, October 16, 1589; in Wodrow's Life of Mr David Weems 14 in Bio. Coll. II (Maitland Club, 1845), the reference is - "With respect to the Kirk-years, that ther be no playing at golf carrict, shinnie" (Liber Coll. Glasg. p. lxxviii). My thanks to Lorna Pike, *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*, University of Edinburgh, for bringing this to my attention and for her assistance with transcription.

¹¹ *Leabhar Comunn nam F`ior Ghael, The Book of the Club of True Highlanders*, p.50.

¹² Hutchinson, 1985, pp. 62 and thereafter.

¹³ See for example, MacLennan, 1995 pp.78 and following.

¹⁴ *The Globe*, 1893. *Inverness Courier*, 12 May 1893; See also MacLennan, 1995 p.215.

¹⁵ MacDonald, 1932, p.55.

¹⁶ At pp.90 and 31 respectively; extracted from Grant, I.F., *Everyday life of an old Highland farm. 1769-1782*.

¹⁷ Edinburgh, 1804, pp.124-127.

¹⁸ My thanks to Roddy MacKinnon for bringing this to my attention.

¹⁹ Published London, 1939.

²⁰ Quoted from Campbell, 1902, pp.239-241.

²¹ Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue, (ongoing), University of Edinburgh. I am indebted to Lorna Pike for her assistance.

²² *National Dictionary of Scotland*, p.196.

²³ I am indebted to John Burnett of the National Museums of Scotland for bringing this to my notice.

²⁴ MacLennan, 1995, pp.92-93.

²⁵ See Alister Chisholm, *Shinty Yearbook*, 1990, p.53; also MacLennan, 1993 and Hutchinson, 1985.

²⁶ MacLennan, 1995, p.99.

²⁷ MacLennan, 1995, p.244.

²⁸ See also Campbell, 1990, pp. 80-81. This version of the song was recorded by John Lorne Campbell from John MacKinnon, *Mac Talla* and Neil D. MacKinnon at Lake Ainslie, Cape Breton, in 1937. The words were transcribed by Dr Calum MacLean. A similar version is to be found in "*Tales until Dawn*" by John Shaw, page 390. The "Hogmanay Verse" (Duan Challuinn) is translated thus: "I have come here to the house with my verse/I am Alasdair son of big John/I will take anything you offer/I will take butter with the bread/or I will take bread with nothing on it/O long-coated old woman/ don't cut your finger/let me in."

²⁹ See for example: Young, 1988; Reid, 1976; Mott, 1989 and Vaughan, 1996 which unfortunately ignores the Scottish dimension!

³⁰ My emphasis. From Prentis, 1987, p.119.

³¹ La Trobe Library, Melbourne. Niel Black Journal (1839-40); 99/2; Papers (1839-80); MSS 8996; Diary entry for 1 January, 1840.

³² See MacLennan, 1995, pp.102 and thereafter.

³³ OUP, 1992, p.168.

³⁴ I am indebted to Dr Cliff Cumming of the School of Australian and International Studies, Deakin University, Geelong, Victoria, for his assistance with this and related points. Dr Cumming has recently, along with Kerry Cardell, published a useful paper on "Scotland's Three Tongues in Australia", *Scottish Studies*, 31, (1992-93), pp.40-62.

³⁵ *Leabhar nam Fìor Ghael*, Book of Sports, Chapter V. Orain na Camanachd.

³⁶ See, for example, the *Illustrated London News*, April 11, 1862. This is a subject which requires further research. I hope to develop it in a future paper.

³⁷ See for example, *Discovery and exploration. God, Gold and Glory*, page 46 (London, no date)

³⁷ See Culin, 1902.

³⁸ See MacKay, 1980.

⁴⁰ See Macpherson, Flora, *Watchman against the World*, (London, 1962, re-printed 1993).

⁴¹ Ferguson, Donald A., *Fad air falbh as Innse Gall. Beyond the Hebrides*. (Halifax, Nova Scotia: 1977 p. 57. Translation: Lively was our song/At Hogmanay/Praising the men no longer with us/Who would give us our due/with the sound of the caman/Quickly, with glasses ranged on the table.

⁴² *Inverness Courier*, 19 February 1880.

⁴³ MacLennan, 1995, p.69.

⁴⁴ See City of Edinburgh Museums and Galleries publication *A Picture of Edinburgh*, Edinburgh, 1995, p.51.

⁴⁵ Acquired by the National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh. This is a large water-colour dated 1876. Again, my thanks to John Burnett.

⁴⁶ Quoted in MacLennan, 1993, p.31.

⁴⁷ Argyllshire Roads Act, 1843. I am indebted to Murdo MacDonald, Argyll and Bute District Council Archivist, Lochgilphead, for bringing this reference to my attention.

⁴⁸ The phrase was first used by Dr Peter English: 1985, p.3.

⁴⁹ For more on Littlejohn and his family, including pictures of his wife and daughter, see the *Celtic Monthly*, 11, Volume IV, (1896), pp.201 and thereafter. See also MacLennan, 1995, Introduction and pp.246 and thereafter.

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