

Bagpipes in the American Revolution

Music has been an integral part of warfare and the soldier's life since the dawn of history. Even the instruments on which it is played have themselves acquired great symbolic power and the Bagpipe was an early entry as a musical weapon of war.

Scotland's national instrument, the Bagpipe or in Gaelic "piob-mhor" (the great pipe) is not, contrary to popular belief, an instrument which has its origins in Scotland. The bagpipe is an instrument of great antiquity, an instrument which has its origins in the Middle East and traveled through and evolved in Europe alongside early civilization. The first documented bagpipe is found on a Hittite slab at Eyuk. This sculptured bagpipe has been dated to 1,000 B.C.

The Roman Emperor Nero considered himself a good piper. He even had the bagpipes put on a coin. Dio Chrysostom wrote in 115 AD:

"They say he can...play the aulos both with his mouth and also with his armpit, a big bag being thrown under it, in order that he might escape the disfigurement of Athens,"

This was one of the first positive references to the bagpipes. Nero also used bagpipes to inspire his troops before battle, though at that time they were generally recognized as peasant entertainment. Soon after the first century, traditions of bagpipes stretch all the way from India to Spain and from France to Egypt.

Middle Ages Pre-Reformation churches reveal carvings of bagpipes. Chaucer refers to the Miller playing pipes in "The Miller's Tale", Documents from the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland (1498 and 1506) refers to payments to the English piper. Shakespeare's "Henry IV" refers to the "Drone of a Lincolnshire Bagpipe". The Irish are believed to have played pipes for Edward I at Calais in 1297 and at the Battle of Falkirk in 1298. In fact, both Henry VII and Henry VIII are believed to have enjoyed pipers.

When they arrived to Scotland, they quickly became a part of Scottish life. Every town would hire a bagpiper, usually out of special taxes from the wealthy families in the area, who would pipe for townspeople on all occasions. In some places the piper would play in churches in place of an organ.

After Scotland was defeated by the British at the Battle of Culloden in 1746, the Celtic people were greatly oppressed. The Great Highland Bagpipes were deemed "an instrument of war" and were banned by the British for more than 50 years.

While many Scottish and Irish people left their native land to escape British rule, the Great Highland Bagpipes were regarded as a symbol of Celtic freedom and heritage. As the immigrants moved away from their heavily oppressed native land, fewer restrictions by the British could be enforced, so the bagpipes were reborn in America. Also, many Scottish pipers joined the British army so that they could legally bagpipe.

Pipers came to America at least as early as the French and Indian War with the arrival of the famous Black Watch, the 42nd Foot, in 1756. At that time, the British Army did not officially authorize pipers for the highland regiments, but they were present: The 42nd was known to have a piper attached to the grenadier company in 1759. Additionally, inspection returns of regiments show that in 1768, the 25th Foot "had a bag piper in the Band of Music", in 1773, the 42nd had "two Pipers and a very good band of music". The 42nd was soon followed by two volunteer Scottish units, Frazer's Highlanders, the 72nd Foot, and Montgomery's Highlanders, the 74th Foot.

The first St. Patrick's Day parade took place not in Ireland, but in the United States. Irish soldiers serving in the English military marched through New York City on March 17, 1762. Along with their music, the parade helped the soldiers to reconnect with their Irish roots, as well as fellow Irishmen serving in the English army.

Pipers also came to the new world with the horde of Scottish immigrants following the 1746 defeat. There were mentions of pipers in descriptions of the Virginia Militia from the Shenandoah Valley, fighting the Indians near what is now Charleston, WVA, in Lord Dunsmore's War of 1774.

In the American Revolution the bagpipe and the kilt were present on both sides. In addition to the five British Army and at least two Loyalist Highland regiments, the Continental Army had its share of Scots with their pipes. General Lachlan MacKintosh's Georgia Brigade of the Line was largely kilted, particularly the 2nd Georgia, and of course marched to the pipes. Most of North Carolina troops at Cowpens and King Mountain were also Scots, and their pipers accompanied them. The blue Kilmarnock bonnet was as popular among the troops as the three-cornered hat - at the Battle of Saratoga, almost the entire Northern Army wore it. The pipes were there as well as they have been in every major battle since.