

# The Games Must Go On: A Comparative of Historical and Modern Scottish Highland Games in the United States

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## **Introduction**

The Highland Games in North America have changed over the course of their history. The early Games underwent a change from the pre to the post Civil War period, a span of time that only lasted four years. Even in those four years the Games made numerous and drastic changes to the themes and activities of the event. Now, in the twenty-first century, the Highland Games in America have made even more substantial changes to their repertoires. In this paper I will explore the two most notable changes to the Games, the expansion to a commodified festival event and the romanticism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Scotland, as well as examine a constant of the Games throughout the years, the importance of family. Early Games are examined from texts. The modern Games are examined from participant observations from Colorado's Longs Peak Scottish Irish Highland Festival, part of the official Rocky Mountain Scottish Athletes region circuit of athletics, and New Mexico's Aztec Highland Games and Rio Grande Valley Celtic Festival.

This paper draws on the methods Dr. Sylvia Rodriguez uses to analyze the Matachines Dance in New Mexico. Her study looks at variations in the performance of this ritual in different communities to understand how the ritual reflects local concerns and issues. I am taking a similar approach, but with respect to the performance of the Games at two different time periods. The

issues and concerns the Game reflects will not be understood as community specific, but rather time specific for Scottish immigrants and descendants in the US who participate.

## **History**

The first Highland Society Gathering at Falkirk gave birth to Games similar to those we know today” (Donaldson,1986, 25). The success of the Highland Games in Scotland, started by Scottish societies, during the mid 1800s inspired the momentum to begin the Games in America. “The oldest charitable society of any sort in this country was the Scots Charitable Society, formed in Boston in 1657” (Donaldson,1986,24). The first Scottish organizations were also economic groups to aid other Scots. Many groups formed as St. Andrew societies, named after the patron saint of Scotland. Nearly all the early societies were reserved for native Scottish males or males of Scottish descent over the age of 18. The Highland Games, for Scottish societies and Scots in America, were a symbol of the culture of Scotland in America early on.

The earliest Games in America were a way for newly displaced Scots to connect through traditions that may have been practiced before the Jacobite Rebellion, or before the Highland Clearances. “The first official record of prearranged and designated sporting events taking place in the Highlands stem from the 11<sup>th</sup> century when it was the custom of clan chiefs to summon their clansmen to periodical gatherings for hunting, the practice of military exercises and the transaction of clan business generally” (Jepson, 2015,98). These gatherings remained a highlight of clan life until the 1746 Act of Proscription which outlawed most highland cultural traditions, to the point that engaging in these traditions was viewed as an act of war. The eventual repeal of these laws in 1782 would lead to an increase in need for preservation of Highland and Scottish culture, tradition and language, including a resurgence of the Highland Games. The Games at Falkirk were successful in gathering positive attention to Scottish heritage, but it was not until

the 1800s that the Games became an event for the Victorian social calendar in the United Kingdom. In America there were generations of displaced Scots receiving information on these happenings back in the homeland. These American Scots would be the ones to form societies drawing on their memories or stories of Highland culture, and similar need to preserve them and relive them with others of the diaspora.

The diaspora of the Scottish people in America encouraged the rise of the Highland Games. Migrations from Scotland to North America began as early as the 1660s; people came mostly as individuals, not in large groups (Dobson,1994,5). These first migrations were primarily merchants who would travel between America and Scotland with trade and would maintain a home in America for convenience. High-immigration occurred in the eighteenth century with the most intense period being from 1760-1775 (Donaldson, 1986, 26). This period fell after the French and Indian War. Some early Scottish immigrants had served and been gifted land, with the requirement that landowners find and settle more tenants to the area, and who better than kinsmen (Dobson,1994,7). Other attractions were freedom from religious prosecution, as many Scots were still Catholic in a Presbyterian United Kingdom, and the economic prospects that America offered. The eighteenth century had also brought turmoil in Scotland that forced groups to migrate, such as the Jacobite Rebellion and the following Highland Clearances, as well as the Scottish potato famine. Many factors contributed to migration into America and the biggest waves of migration were centralized to the mid and late eighteenth century (Donaldson,1986, 26). Most of the Scottish population that immigrated to North America would settle in the northeast coast and Canada, as well as in the south, mostly the Carolinas.

### **Pre and Post Civil War**

The turmoil of the Civil War clearly influenced the Games, and scholars described the Games in terms of pre and Post Civil War eras, but there is little examination on why. “In the United States, (the Games’) history would take the shape of an hourglass with a slim bottom.” (Donaldson, 1986,23) The Games in the United States began to emerge shortly before the Civil War. It was during the period after the war that they became more elaborate events. The hourglass that shapes the history of the Games in the United States mirrors the dispersed population of Scots in America, as well as the increasing interest of its events for immigrants. Early immigrations of Scottish peoples settled mostly in the South, but the most consistent Games events were held in the North. This may account for the divide in pre and post Civil War eras of the Games themselves, the persistent divide of North and South that was caused by the Civil War.

Before the Civil War there were only a handful of annual Games in the United States, in New York City, Boston, Philadelphia and Newark, New Jersey. The Scottish societies that had formed in these major cities were “economic- beneficent groups aimed at helping indigent fellow Scots.” (Donaldson, 1986, 24). “From the beginning, [these societies] realized that an admission fee could serve as an important, and also the sole, source of income for these popular events” (Donaldson,1986, 27). Each of these cities contributed to shaping the Games as we know them today (Donaldson,1986). At some of these early Games there were as many as 25 events, including athletics and dancing. Prize money or extravagant prizes were awarded. Most offered a prize for the best dressed Highlander, a prize that would only be awarded to men as the kilt was male attire.

After the Civil War, drastic changes began to be made to the Games. In San Francisco in 1866 after the country regained its balance post war, the Games boasted a full program of

athletics, complete with guest judges and prizes. The tradition of a Chief's Message was included within the event for the first time. The Chief's Message is a written personal address that is distributed at the Games that often acknowledges members of the community and highlights events of the Games or in the community. The "Chief" is a member of local Scottish society, usually a man but recently women have been elected too, that is assigned as Chief of the Games, in charge of overseeing organization of the event. It was in the Post Civil War period that the Games became a social highlight of the season, adding balls after the schedule of athletics. "By 1873 the Games had assumed a traditional format which encompassed four segments: Games in the morning, intermission at noon, resumption of the Games in the afternoon, and dancing for all at the end of the day" (Donaldson,1986, 34).

The New York Caledonian Society contributed to a true blend of Scottish heritage and American ideals. By the early 1900s "Club pipers would lead costumed members and their guests from club premises to their car...with much pomp at the Games site." (Donaldson,1986, 30). Parades before Games is an almost exclusively American tradition for Games. These had their origin in the practice of escorting esteemed club members to the games and gradually evolved to full parades of club members and others through town squares to the games. The New York Games added prizes for pipe bands. There was the incorporation of more festival activities, music, dancing and entertainment during the intermissions, and a standardized schedule of events became popular. Also, non-prized events for girls and women were added to the Games, which traditionally had been only male. At one early Games a woman even showed up in a kilt, another tradition that belong solely to males until after the Civil War (Donaldson, 1986,27).

### **The Concerns of the Early Games**

The Games served many purposes beyond the strictly economic. The societies had a creed that read, “To relieve indigent and unfortunate Scotsmen or their families; to foster and encourage a love of Scotland, its history, literature and customs, and, for a number, is added *encouragement of the athletic games*; and to promote friendly and social relation of members”

(Donaldson,1986,25). As Scottish immigrants were becoming part of American society and memories of Scotland were becoming more distant, a concern was that people remember their heritage. A second purpose was to maintain and create ties between Scottish families in the large expanse of America. These first Games in the United States developed for Scots to “seek out and share their Games heritage...with their opportunities for display of and reward for brawn.”

(Donaldson, 1986, 23). The games likely served to promote marriages between people of Scottish heritage (Jepson, 2015). The demonstration of strength was one way to attract a partner.

### **Modern Games**

The Games begin to move away from traditional schedules as early as the 1940s to become full-blown festivals. The Longs Peak Games were initiated in the early 1970’s as a way to extend the tourist season into the fall (Estes Park NEWS). The event is now a highlight of the close-knit community of Estes Park. It now boasts “the best Celtic parade in North America”, as well as a full weekend of Highland Games and Strongman competitions, piping competitions, dancing competitions and more. While this event is one of the youngest Games, it does pull in quite a crowd, numbers from previous years being almost equal to the Pleasanton Games, the largest Scottish Games in the United States, held in Pleasanton California, a three-day event. When asked about events at the Games patrons often showed the biggest interest in two events, jousting and seeing the band from Glasgow, Albannach, not actually the games themselves. The band is quite popular, and their shows were always packed. The jousting was hardly viewable if

one did not get a seat early. The athletics were easily viewable and gathered a fair crowd, but nowhere near as much as other events. There is fair food galore at the event, and markedly no traditional Scottish foods (at other events there are often Scottish societies tents selling “full English” breakfasts or Scotch eggs).

While the event is a smaller affair, the Aztec Highland Games have a variety of unique attractions. There are belly dancers that perform and one year there was even a contest for best romance cover re-enactment. “These events are dependent on the enthusiasm of the organizers who work without professional aid with the aim of maintaining the spirit of the community” (Brewster et al.,2010 ,12) This Games has gone beyond traditional events. “The Games programme then, reflects its creators, being simultaneously Scottish and American.” (Jepson, 2015, 102) Some Games, like Longs Peak, include classic car shows, making them distinctly American, where the Aztec Games use attractions like a local belly dancing group. This mixing of American values also defines the push to move from being just a Games affair to a full commodified festival event. At the Aztec Games there is also a midway of food stalls and shopping booths. Here there are more handmade items including fares not related to Scotland.

There are also events, like the Rio Grande Valley Celtic Festival (RGVCF), which hosts the Highland Games but primarily presents themselves as a pan-Celtic festival. The Rio Grande Valley Celtic Festival puts emphasis on athletics, Scottish heavy athletics and Celtic sports, with its mission statement and is supported by the New Mexico Celtic Athletes Association. “Each year, the Association hosts a festival that engages Celtic dance, athletics, games, music, arts, history and oral traditions that promote Celtic Heritage in New Mexico.” (celtfestabq.com) Yet it presents itself first as a festival. There is still a midway for food, distinctly New Mexican food and fair food but also Welsh cakes and Scottish goods. This makes it different from the Long’s

Peak Games, which presents itself as authentically Scottish, but offers no Celtic foods. There are also rows of shopping booths, booths for Scottish wares and everything from children's toys to early weaponry. The heavy athletics are prominent, in the middle of the available grounds, flanked by beer gardens to sit and watch while relaxing. Near the back of the venue there are rugby matches. The festival, like Longs Peak, also has stages for musical acts to play and for dance competitions. Not all of the musical acts are Celtic influenced, but many are.

### **Commercialization of Modern Games**

As these examples show, one of the themes contemporary Games have in common is commercialization. At the Pleasanton Games, along with a midway devoted to food there are two designated shopping areas. The merchandise ranges from Scottish themed wares one might find at a tourist shop to handmade trinkets. The shopping areas account for more square footage than the arenas for the athletics. “The competitive edge enjoyed by those cultures “which brand the best” is illustrated.” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009, 18). Furthermore, attending certain events gives your booth an assumed advantage of notoriety within the community, as larger, more commercialized events usually have limited booth availability and spots are reserved for those who have attended before. “...an event that possesses such significance, in terms of tradition, attractiveness, quality or publicity, that the event provides the host venue, community, or destination with a competitive advantage.” (Brewster et al.,2010,11) Attending the Pleasanton Games and Estes Park Games counted for bragging rights by booth owners, as they are Games of notoriety.

The first Scottish societies sought to provide a cultural space for diasporic Scots, connect them to their history and fellow kinsmen as well as provide economic aid. As the Games developed, fees were charged, and the funds were reallocated within the community. Recently



Games profits have been used to provide more exciting and costly entertainment, like jousting and popular music groups. What once began as small, local organized events has become large scale, sometimes globally organized festivals. Games are promoted beyond community levels to entice a large array of audiences to attend. “The origins of event management now mark a shift from individual events and community initiatives, such as the Scottish Highland Games, to more professional and commercialised events run by event organisers as part of the wider professionalisation of the field” (Brewster et al. 2010, 2) With the 21<sup>st</sup> century shift to large scale entertainment, outside of athletics , we begin to see more and more outside influence from event organizers. Organizers are not solely Scottish societies, but rather coordinated complex enterprises.

### **Romantic Impulse of Modern Games**

Renaissance festivals often inspire patrons to dress in fantasy costumes as well as Renaissance dress. The modern Highland Games see similar fashions. It may be that the events draw in similar patrons and so merchandise sold is catered to those who enjoy fantasy. But this is a very modern addition to Games culture. In Pre and Post Civil War Games, distinctive dress would have been mostly reserved for men who wore their family tartan, as a way to connect to Highland culture that was made illegal after the 1746 Act of Proscription, while winning prize money for being best-dressed. Modern Games patrons are beginning more and more to dress in fantasy or vaguely historical clothing rather than historically specific clothing. As the Comaroffs describe heritage-as-property, it is “property that appears to be highly replicable without losing its aura; property whose commodification often adds value to, rather than cheapens, identity; property that however widely it circulates at the behest of the market, typically resists the abstraction of its particularity to bland ordinariness.” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009, 131)

Patrons at some events were dressed in renaissance clothing, women wearing long and flowing dresses or corseted gowns and men in billowed sleeve shirts with tights or breeches. In addition, some games also incorporated “exotic” or Orientalist dress. The Aztec Games, for example, invited a belly dancing troupe that maintained their dress throughout the event and sold some of their previously used costumes.

Besides dressing in fantasy/Renaissance clothing, fairgoers favor one particular image of Scottish dress, that made famous by Sir Walter Scott. After publishing the Waverly Novels in the early nineteenth century, their descriptions of Highland Scotland encapsulated the romantic rolling hills and lush fields, beautiful women, men in kilts and the air of rebellion in the time of Bonnie Prince Charlie. In the United States this view of Scotland has persisted and ossified. Whereas during the Civil War era dressing in traditional Highland dress was not as far removed from this romantic period, and done to win prize money, Highland fashion has gone through many changes since then. Yet at modern Games event dress from the romantic period has become standard. From photo archives and clan row photo albums, patrons’ dress in the 1970s-90s was not as firmly tied to this romantic image, kilts were worn but generally with t-shirts or other modern clothing. Dressing in a period themed dress and wool shawl made the author more approachable and encouraged interviews, emphasizing that highlighting the romanticized elements of the culture is emphasized in the modern Games.

Given that the romantic Walter Scott period was a liminal period of Highland culture, the historically themed costumes could also be said to be fantasy attire. During the time period of the Waverly novels, Scotland was at the beginnings of the Presbyterian Reformation, and Catholicism was being swept to the fringes of society. While Catholicism is a monotheistic religion, it allowed for more pagan ideas of those who still held on to beliefs such as solstices

and deities to be encompassed into the folds of Catholicism by incorporating them into Christian ideas. For example, the pagan Goddess Brigid became the patron Saint Brigid, solstice events became Catholic feast days and holidays. The Reformation sought to eliminate the touches of paganism in the Christian religion.

The merchandise at these games is also often tied to the Walter Scott inspired image of Scotland. Many of the wares at the Aztec Games, Longs Peak Games, and RGVCF were themed to the romanticized period. At both the Aztec Games and Longs Peak Games, an entire booth is devoted to *Outlander* (2014) merchandise, a popular television series taking place in the Scottish Highlands and then in early America from the mid 1700's to the American Revolution. These booths sell the fictional, television version tartan of the Clan Fraiser, clothes that were inspired by characters dress in the show and other branded merchandise from the franchise.

Scotland itself has begun to market itself to tourists in this romantic light. Comaroff and Comaroff in *Ethnicity, Inc.* (2009) describe this process as "nation-branding." Countries perpetuate certain stereotypes to encourage tourism, as "millions of people" share an "emotional identification" with a shared view of the country (p. 123). One of the easiest ways to highlight romantic Highland culture is by dress, as it is visual and tangible, and also easily commercialized. The Highland Games in the US are then in a sense in sync with the marketing of Scotland itself and could be working to indirectly promote tourism and the bringing of revenue back to Scotland from the wealthier US. The games still then could be said to play an economic role, just not the same role as they did prior to the Civil War. The circulation of money at present is also more entwined with the circulation of an image and an aura. Creating new and exciting ways to celebrate the Games, and branding Games, keeps the Games going.

### **Continuity of Family**

One of the continuities between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Games is the value placed on family. Within this focus on family, there is, however, a slightly different emphasis. The 19<sup>th</sup> century games focused on present family connections and the creation of new family ties. The current games are focused more on current family ties and the familial ties people have to the historical past. Early Games were more localized, with community members gathering with intentions of strengthening community bonds through the event. Families could meet strengthen bonds by creating a space to promote marriage alliances, and the Games gave young men a chance to show their brawn in competition. The Early Games also offered financial support to families who needed it, as determined by local Scottish societies.

In the contemporary Games, the focus on the family is seen in the emphasis placed on clans. Clan row is a designated area at the Games where booths are set up represented by ties to a Scottish clan. The clan system dissolved after 1746 but relating to others with a common heritage in a society of diaspora did not. The clan booths are usually run by a family unit, with the connection of heritage on either the maternal or paternal side or a small unit of individuals who share connections to the clan they are representing. There may be one or more booths that display the same clan's name, being represented by different unaffiliated groups. From interviews, it is popular for clan booths to be run by in-laws and close friends of the family, because of the marked importance of the event to the actual person who shares connection with the represented clan. Besides being proud of one's booth many of clan row brag about the circuit of Games that they attend representing clan row.

Longs Peak has one of the largest clan rows with 75 booths. The event at Longs Peak is held on a large festival ground and the clan row accounts for almost half of the entertainment space, outside of the games arena itself. There is a large tent that accommodates many of the

booths inside it, packed in so tight they sometimes overlap and yet there is still overflow with booths set up around the tent. Those interviewed from clan row at Longs Peak said they were attending, and planned to keep attending the event, because of the importance of it to their families. The RGVCF also boasts a devoted area to a clan row, with some 20 booths. When asked, patrons also related that they were at the event because a family member invited them or because they had gone with family before. Even in a total festival setting family motivates the event for the patrons.

Clan Row booths represent both Lowland and Highland clans. The booths are run generally by groups who bear Scottish family names; the Scots, the Buchanans, etc. Each booth will have information on their Clan specifically, but also usually any small clans that were represented by the larger group. They booths encourage anyone with these surnames to learn more about their ancestral history and sometimes sell information of genealogy or merchandise reflecting the clan. Clan booths will have displays set up about Scottish history in general or about the areas that a specific clan once inhabited. They are meant to be welcoming to everyone and groups often enjoy telling stories or engaging in song or dance at these booths. The Clan Scot booths at all events attended seemed to enjoy recounting the history of how Scotland got its name from their clan. They encourage forming of new relationships and education about Scottish culture.

From small Games to large ones, and even at proclaimed festivals, family is a common factor. Family is what encourages members to attend and keep attending these events, family is why clan row members pay to attend an event (more than the price of standard patrons) that they will not profit from. This is the most unchanging element from the first Games in America and with hope is a lasting element. The contemporary Games are more focused on the history of

families and less focused on networking to attract a marriage partner for their children than attendees of the early Games.

## **Conclusion**

The American Games at first tried to emulate the success of the Games in Scotland, eventually also becoming the seasons social highlight. To begin with the Games were just that, athletics and competition events to show strength and to have boasting rights or even prize money. Now they are spectator events, still seasonal affairs but on a larger scale, with elements not traditional and not solely athletic. There are patrons outside of Scottish societies who gather to celebrate a romantic Highland Scotland. The dress and merchandise index a type of fantasy as much as a historical period in Scotland. Part of the pleasure of attending has to do with connecting to this aura which Scotland the nation is also marketing to promote tourism. Most patrons attend in both eras because of family or as a family event. They engage in a type of *communitas* with those who are there. For the early US Scottish Games there was a focus on future family ties and seeking out marriage partners. For the contemporary Games, there is a focus on clan history and how people are rooted in the past.

Just as Rodriguez (1996) shows that when costumes and characters in the *Matachines* dance emphasize race or hierarchy, racial mixing or hierarchy are concerns for the communities performing the dance, the differences in the way the Scottish Games is performed in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries are related to the concerns of the time. Early immigrants were concerned with basic economic support and with establishing familial ties and growing families in the US.

Contemporary Scottish Americans are concerned with connecting themselves to an ever-distant

place of origin. Early ideas are still present, like the importance of family, but they shift focus to fit in the contemporary world. Family is not about keeping ties within the current community but becomes about connecting with ancestral family genealogy. The Games still act as a beacon for Scottish Americans but now aim to entice large scale numbers of patrons, Scottish American or not, by using different forms of entertainment, not just athletic and dance events. At early Games, Highlander dress was prized but was not dress centuries removed, and it was only practiced by men. Now dress has become an escapist way to return to a romantic time past from the stressful modern world. The Games have moved from a cultural event to a celebration of a common culture mixed with ethnic entrepreneurship. At contemporary events everyone is Celtic or Scottish for the day. Patrons can eat, shop and enjoy romantic Scotland and modern America in a festival format. Creating new and exciting ways to celebrate the Games, and branding Games, keeps the Games going even if in changed form.

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