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PATRICIANS, POLITICS AND PORRIDGE OLYMPICS – THE SCOTTISH HIGHLAND GAMES AND THE SWISS UNSPUNNEN FESTIVAL AND THE IDEA OF THE NOBLE SAVAGE

Axel Koehler

Master of Philology, ORCID: 0000-0002-2990-0921

University of Edinburgh,

Department of Celtic Studies and Scottish Ethnology;

Department of Migration and Refugees,

teacher of German as a Foreign Language in the service;

GERMANY

Abstract

The following article will first consider the similarities and the differences of the Swiss and the Scottish concepts of folk culture, then the author will give a thorough overview of the Scottish Highland Games and their Swiss equivalents today, before examining the origins of either in order to discuss the genuineness of these events and their acceptance and role in their respective communities. For providing a broad and exact overview, the origins of the various athletic disciplines of the ethnic sports competitions in question will also be considered. In the Scottish case, the primary question here is in how far Highland Games are still genuinely Gaelic or whether they have ever been thus, and whether there are any Highland Games that are true to the pre-nineteenth century origins of most athletic disciplines featured. In the Swiss case, it will be shown that the originally staged herdsfolk games have indeed been accepted by the wider Swiss German community and are today largely arranged for locals and less so for tourists, though the latter are welcome. These are the Scottish Highland Games as hosted by various towns and villages all over Scotland, its traditional diaspora overseas and beyond – as will be discussed in the course of the text – and the Swiss Äpler-und-Schwingfeste (alpine herdsfolk festivals featuring traditional Swiss wrestling), the largest of which is the Trachten-und Alphirtenfest (festival of traditional Swiss regional costume and upland herdsfolk) at Unspunnen in the vicinity of Interlaken in the canton of Berne. It is also known as the Unspunnenfest. When the author first heard about the latter event during a holiday in Switzerland in 1987, seeing the pictures of the last Unspunnenfest six years ago, he found some of its features quite similar to the Scottish Highland Games with which he was already familiar having then travelled to Scotland regularly since 1981. Having now lived in Scotland for a whole decade and matured into a fully-blown scholar of Scottish Gaelic language and culture and being equally knowledgeable in Scottish Lowland culture, yet also familiar with and interested in Swiss culture, the author decided to contribute to this project his study of the role of Highland Games and Äplerspiele in today's Scottish and Swiss communities.

Key words: Ethnosport, Highland Games, Schwingen, Traditional Sports and Games, Unspunnenfest.



Folk culture in Scotland and Volkskultur in Switzerland

This contribution to the discussion of Volkskultur or folk culture today is a comparative study of two events of ethnosport according to theory of Alexey Kylasov (Kylasov, 2012)¹: “each ethnic group creates its own ethnosport based on traditional sports and games”. Before various concepts of folk culture are discussed here, it needs to be said that there is no such thing as a Scottish folk culture. Scotland today is defined by three indigenous language communities, i.e. Gaels, Lowland Scots and Anglo-Scots, and various immigrant communities, i.e. Irish, Italians, Lithuanians, Pakistanis etc. and even Germans and German Swiss. They do not infringe upon Scottish nationality – Scotland has from her very beginnings been a multilingual and multicultural nation, though the last remaining one of her most indigenous cultures has not always had an easy ride². In general, one may say that in all the cultural communities present in Scotland there are three camps – the traditionalists, the syncretists and the assimilationists³. The latter are those who are commonly referred to as 'Anglo-Scots', as they have adopted an English accent and tend to look down on anything relating to Scottish traditions, be they authentic by origin or merely by perception, or to Scottish popular culture (e.g. Burns Night celebrations, Scottish comedians from Harry Lauder of the heyday of music hall entertainment to Billy Connolly and today's TV comedians, cèilidh dances, vernacular Scottish literature such as the works of Neil Munro, Neil Gunn, Compton Mackenzie, Lewis Grassie Gibbon et al, popular Scottish journals such as the Scots Magazine and the People's Friend, both published by DC Thompson in Dundee who are also renowned for their thoroughly Scottish comic book series Oor Wullie⁴ and The Broons,⁵ the Beano, the Dandy and the Topper, most of which are held in Dundonian dialect and first appeared as cartoon strips in the Sunday Post also published by DC Thompson; Scottish convenience food and drink such as Tunnock's chocolate wafer bars⁶ and Irn Bru⁷). The latter part of the population belongs predominantly to the upper class and the nouveau riche or the urban "cosmopolitan" intellectuals, yet this class had in the past adopted a romanticised image of Scottish Highland culture tailored to their needs known as tartanry or tartanism. In this study, more shall be said about that phenomenon and its very adherents, who at the same time frown upon anything genuinely Scottish as boorish and embarrassing, a sibling phenomenon to tartanry commonly referred to as

¹ Alexey Kylasov (2012) Ethnosport. The End of Decline (Sport: Kultur, Veränderung / Sport: Culture, Change). Published by LIT Verlag, 2015.

² Celtic, Gaelic and Scottish' in: Newton, Michael (2000) A Handbook of the Scottish Gaelic World. Dublin: Four Courts Press, p. 35-40. See also 'A Gaelic history of Scotland', *ibid.*, Ch. 2, pp. 41-76.

³ Newton, 2000, p. 23.

⁴ Scots for "Our Willie", the author's translation.

⁵ Scots for "the Browns", ditto. These may be the Scots counterpart to S'Knüslis by Brigitte Fries and Liz Sutter in terms of genesis and popularity – the latter series was also born as a newspaper cartoon strip. Comic. Visuelle Kommunikation Brigitte Fries. May 23th 2019, retrieved from:

<http://www.brigittefries.ch/comic/comic01.html> Likewise, one might say the Broons were a Scots equivalent of – Papa Moll. May 23th 2019, retrieved from: <http://globi.ch/papa-moll/>

⁶ The Scottish equivalent to Swiss Toggenburger chocolate wafer bars by Kägi Söhne AG and the Austrian Mannerschnitt, as much as the Kägi sweet factory is the Swiss equivalent to Tunnock's Bakery.

⁷ An iron-containing orangeade originally made in Glasgow by Barr & Sons, more popular in Scotland than Coca-Cola and therefore the Scottish equivalent of Rivella. Irn-Bru also contains caffeine.



the Scots cringe. This cultural cringe is also more often than not adopted by people from small rural communities bent on joining the higher echelons of society. The tartanry phenomenon is not without importance to the genesis of the modern Highland Games, which is why it will not leave the discussion any time soon.

Many of the observations made above will also apply to Switzerland, which has also traditionally contained four distinct linguistic and cultural communities, i.e. the German Swiss speaking various dialects of the Alemannic subgroups of the German language, the Romansh speaking French (in the Jura) and Franco-Provençal (in the cantons of Fribourg, Geneva, Valais and Vaud), the Italian Swiss and the Rhaeto-Romance Swiss in Grisons or Graubunden whose dialects are collectively known as Rumantsch. The latter have in recent years forged some bond with Gaelic-speaking communities in Ireland and Scotland⁸, whereas most German Swiss might rather feel an affinity to either Scots-speaking Lowlanders⁹ or Anglo-Scots. There will be traditionalists, syncretists and assimilationists yielding to mainstream Anglo-Americanised German urban culture and neglecting their native accent in favour of an artificial yet more common polished speech. One might ask why the author pays such particular attention to language matters in this context, yet language is the great container of culture and the culture of a community is defined by its language. Without Gaelic, there would not be any Gaels; without Scots, no Scottish Lowlanders and Northeasterners; without German, no Germans or German Swiss etc¹⁰. Culture itself may perpetually change and adapt, be that folk culture or so-called higher culture, and thus does the language. Therefore, one may also say that language is dependent on – or contained in - culture. There is no such thing as an invented tradition, as Eric Hobsbawm et al. purported in recent years, merely tradition reinvented or adapted¹¹. The general message of Hobsbawm's and Ranger's book was all too soon generalised and adopted at face value by too many who would not – or could not – distinguish between the pre-modern core of some recently-modified cultural practices and the new myths created around them. To some, the message they perceived this book to hold, viz. that most icons and phenomena commonly associated with folklore were only fakelore, was a welcome alibi to do away with all distinct regional costumes and practices etc. without compromise, thereby failing to acknowledge that some of these matters were indeed authentic to the community – no matter how recently they had been introduced – and that there were certain costumes, dances, festivals etc. whose

⁸ In a co-production between Donnie Munro of Runrig fame, people of the Lia Rumantscha (the Romansh League of Grisons), Irish-language associations and young speakers of Romansh, Irish and Scottish Gaelic, a concert was organised and a CD was produced, both under the trilingual title *Beo Brhomhar – Ber agus Beothail – Viver e far vibra*.

⁹ Scots is an Anglic, and thus a West Germanic language more closely related to Swiss German than to the Celtic language that is Scottish Gaelic.

¹⁰ Cf. Newton, 2000, p. 21.

¹¹ Hobsbawm, Eric and Ranger, Terence (1995) *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. For the purpose of this study, see especially Trevor-Roper, Hugh (1983) *The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland*, pp. 15-42. Schlie, Heike and Bulang, Thomas. *Invention of Tradition – Invention of Innovation*. May 23th 2019, retrieved from:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/tagungsberichte/id=563&count=32&recno=20&sort=datum&order=down&geschichte=149>



origins were actually older than the shape in which we are familiar with them today¹². In Scotland, this applies to both the Highland dress and the Highland Games; in Switzerland, this also applies to most regional costumes and events such as the gathering of Unspunnen. Any newly-introduced item may become an authentic tradition once it has been accepted and adopted by the community¹³.

Porridge Olympics from Uist to Unspunnen and beyond

Highland Games may be found all over Scotland and in the worldwide Scottish diaspora, i.e. North America (especially in North Carolina and the Canadian province of Nova Scotia), South Africa, Australasia¹⁴ (mainly in Otago, NZ). But in Argentina and Chile, where a community of Highland and mainly Hebridean descent has been living in Patagonia since the late nineteenth century and the 1900s, there used to be Highland Games, but today there are not any left¹⁵. Those events in the New World are markedly different to those in the motherland referred to by expatriate Gaels as an t-Seann-Dùthaich, "the old country". Before one is going to say anything about this distinction, however, one should say something about the events most Highland Games have in common. These are divided into the heavy events such as tossing the caber (Gaelic *tilgeil a' chabair*, "tossing the tree-trunk"), putting the stone (Gaelic *putadh na cloiche*) – which Scottish Highland Games have in common with the Unspunnen games – and wrestling, further tug of war, hammer throwing and weight throwing (weight for height and weight for distance), pole vaulting and track racing; and piping and Highland Dancing competitions¹⁶. It is common, though not compulsory to don full Highland dress at the Games, be that in Aberdeen or in Auckland NZ. Apart from all these commonplaces, Scottish Highland Games in Scotland are not really homogenous, either, in terms of arrangement and audience. The large mainstream Highland Games in mainland Scotland, from Braemar to Oban, are often a rather formal affair. There is a great presence of upper class people, as most of these games enjoy the patronage of local lairds (i.e. landlords, squires), and people sit in stalls as in a theatre according to their rank in society, especially at those games where members of the Royal Family are also present¹⁷. For most local people, however, the attraction of those games lies in the fringe events which take place all over the marquee and in the beer tent or hall. For the aristocratic spectators, the Highland Games are just another event on their calendar of sporting activities commonly known as "the seasons" also including the Derby at Epsom, the Ascot Gold Cup racing week and the grouse and deer shooting seasons. For tourists, the big Highland Games and their surrounding

¹² Cf. the book review of 'The Invention of Tradition by Danny Yee'. May 23th 2019, retrieved from: http://dannyreviews.com/h/The_Invention_of_Tradition.htm

¹³ Bendix, Regina (1989) *Tourism and Cultural Displays: Inventing Traditions for Whom?* Journal of American Folklore, Vol. 102, No. 404 (Apr.-Jun. 1989), pp. 133-39, 142.

¹⁴ Australia and New Zealand.

¹⁵ The British Presence in Southern Patagonia. May 23th 2019, retrieved from: <http://www.patbrit.org/eng/index.htm>

¹⁶ Morrison, Donald (1994) *Highland Games* in: Derick S. Thomson, ed., *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland*, 2nd edn. Glasgow: Gairm, 1994, pp. 118-120.

¹⁷ Jarvie, Grant (2003) *Highland Games, Ancient Sporting Traditions and Social Capital in Modern International Communities*, *Studies in Physical Culture and Tourism*, Special Issue on Ethnology of Sport, Volume 10, No. 1 (June 2003), pp. 31-32.



features and iconic phenomena such as the whole paraphernalia of pipers and pipe bands, little girls in Highland Dress doing Highland Dancing and big brawny kilted men hurling heavy things from stones to tree trunks convey a typical image of Scotland. It is the task of the further sections in this article to demonstrate the authenticity of this spectacle and to unravel the true face of Highland Scotland and its traditional sports and pastimes, and to show how the Scottish travesty show the big Highland Games are today first came into being, and in order to get there it takes a view of smaller and more local games. There are still Highland Games to be found in Scotland where everything is more down to earth and fairly laid back, where people do not need to squeeze themselves into stalls and can roam the location at their own pace and their own will. This does not mean that those games were too relaxed in terms of safety and security, but it means that there is more flexibility in terms of schedule and display. At the same time, there is more genuine local atmosphere to be enjoyed and though some may find those smaller games rather quaint and more similar to an old-fashioned country fair, one will come to appreciate them more than the big name games because the committees responsible for initiating them still put more effort and more heart and soul in their arrangement. The annual games in Uist and Barra in the Western Isles are fine examples for such games¹⁸. The author has repeatedly been to the North and South Uist Games which take place in the machair of Hosta and the machair of Askernish respectively¹⁹, and can only confirm Grant Jarvie's notion. What Jarvie does not mention in his text is that those games are events where the ancient yet vibrant, but threatened, language of the Scottish Highlanders – namely Gaelic – is still spoken. Barra and Uist are still Gaelic-speaking communities, thus their Highland Games still have the soul the big events in the mainland are missing. The same applies to Islay and Skye, and a few mainland places in the West Highlands such as Glenelg²⁰. Many of these rural games also have cèilidh dances on their schedule. These games are mainly arranged for locals and mainly attended by locals, but visitors are welcome. Those gatherings are closer to their pre-nineteenth century historic origins than their mainstream counterparts.

It was mentioned above that those gatherings had the charm of an old-fashioned country fair, and apart from the athletic competitions, that is exactly what they are to most Highland people and the denizens of the northern and north-eastern Lowlands of Scotland such as eastern Perthshire, the soft hills of Lower Angus and Strathmore, the Mearns and the Mounth in Kincardineshire, the eastern uplands of Aberdeenshire, Banffshire and Mar between Dee, Don and Deveron and the foothills and coastal plains from Moray and Easter Ross to Caithness in the northernmost stretch of Scotland. It is a season for meeting old friends and joining them for blether (a chat) and a pint or two, to bargain and to barter, as there are of course vending stalls as well. For most Scots-Americans and Scots-Canadians, however, Highland Games or Gatherings are primarily about heritage and nostalgia²¹, and this applies most likely also to other Scots overseas from Argentina to Australia, and from Cape Town to Pretoria. Whereas most

¹⁸ Jarvie, 2003, p. 32.

¹⁹ 'Machair' in Faclair Dwelly Air-Loidhne (Dwelly's Dictionary Online). May 23th 2019, retrieved from: <http://www.cairnwater.co.uk/gaelicdictionary/?txtSearch=machair>

²⁰ Jarvie, *ibid.* Regarding Gaelic speakers in Glenelg.

²¹ Jennifer, Allan (2004) Kilts, Clans, Bagpipes, and Caber Tossing: Reinvented Traditions and Building Scottish-American Heritage', seminar paper, December 26th 2004, p. 9.



Scots in the old country go to a Highland Gathering to socialise and to place a bet or two on the athletes, dancers or pipers, the Scots overseas and their descendants go there to frequent the clan tents and evoke a Scottish Highland scene that is no more if it has ever been.

The greatest Highland Games in the USA are those at Grandfather Mountain in North Carolina²², and there is another great Highland Gathering in North Carolina named the Flora MacDonald Highland Games at Red Springs in the Cape Fear area²³. Yet another Highland Gathering takes place at Laurinburg NC, also in the Cape Fear area, but it is the name of the former event that is most significant here as it points towards the authenticity of Scottish Highland heritage in this part of North Carolina. By the 1880s, Gaelic had finally given way to English in the area and was no longer a community language. Thus, there would be no Gaelic at all to be heard or seen at Highland Gatherings if it was not for Donald Frank MacDonald, the founder of the Grandfather Mountain Games and the Clan Donald Society of the United States, who learned Gaelic in Scotland and operates a Gaelic tent for teaching the language, the culture and its song tradition at the Games.

North Carolina is not the only US state that once had a Gaelic-speaking community and today boasts Highland Games. But then, a lot of the big Highland Gatherings in North America are, and thus it is in Scotland, as has already been mentioned above. Everything 'Highland' at those events is a mere husk, a surrogate, as the true language of the Highlands is hardly spoken there or not spoken at all. At some of those events, the Gaelic language is not even welcome, as the old prejudices of monoglot Englishspeakers and the internalised cultural cringe of anglicised Scots prevail. There is in North America a whole plethora of Highland Societies, Robert Burns Societies and more of the like – many of whose members have no idea of what Scottish Highland culture is really about, what it was like or what it will be like in the future...and neither are they really concerned about that. As Jennifer Allan writes:

“The trouble with writing about Scottish heritage from an American perspective is the difficulty most Americans have in separating the myth from 'Brigadoon'²⁴ and 'Braveheart' with the actual history of Highland and Lowland Scotland [...]”²⁵ and “Ancestral Scots attend Highland games and Robert Burns Dinners, read materials about Scottish history, and wear Highland attire, but do not have a connection to or knowledge of contemporary Scotland. Contemporary Scots (in North America) are often recent immigrants from Scotland and are interested in the Scotland of today and tomorrow, not the Scotland of the yesterday. For ancestral Scots, Scotland is a

²² Scottish Highland Games and Events: North Carolina' on US Scots. May 23th 2019, retrieved from: <http://www.usscots.com/event/geographical/North-Carolina/> Cf. Deepak, Chabhra (2001) Heritage Tourism: An Analysis of Perceived Authenticity and Economic Impact of the Scottish Highland Games in North Carolina', PhD thesis (Raleigh: North Carolina State University, 2001), p. 13.

²³ Cochran, Terry. Flora MacDonald Games. May 23th 2019, retrieved from: <http://www.electricscotland.com/gatherings/flora/index.htm> Cf. Photos on Oct 2nd 2004 in the Fayetteville Observer. May 23th 2019, retrieved from: <http://photos.fayobserver.com/mycapture/folder.asp?event=14899&CategoryID=1329>

²⁴ Brigadoon is a 1954 Hollywood film musical based on an earlier stage musical (1947). Dowling, William C. (2002) John Ford's Festive Comedy: Ireland Imagined in The Quiet Man', *Éire-Ireland: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Irish Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2002), pp. 190-211.

²⁵ Allan, 2004, p. 12.



land of heather and thistles, castles and clans. They are rarely interested in the plight of the urban poor or the health problems currently afflicting a majority of the Scottish population. Scotland of the past holds more importance for ancestral Scots than Scotland of the future [...] “²⁶.

Most of those people Allan describes here have no clue about Gaelic language and culture and whether they (still) exist²⁷. Moreover, as may be seen by the example of the Fergus Highland Games in Fergus, Ontario, this kind of Scottish émigré gathering has sprung up even in places where Gaelic had never been spoken by the original settlers because they were Lowlanders²⁸. The Fergus Games are a rather recently invented tradition, having only been founded in 1946 by a new incomer from Aberdeenshire, one Alex Robertson who emigrated to Canada in 1921²⁹. The adoption of ersatz Highland culture by people whose forebears had been Lowlanders is tartanism or Highlandism at its most typical, but then, North American Highland culture is – as testified by Allan and others – just a transatlantic extension of the very Balmorality that contributed to the genesis of mainstream Highland Games in the old country and the New World as described above. This genesis shall be the topic of the following section in this article, but this section is not yet concluded. Before the discussion turns to the situation of the Swiss counterpart of Scottish Highland Games in today's society in the old country and (possibly) overseas, one word needs yet to be said about Scottish Highland Games in the urban centers of North America. Some of them are not just recently born festivals, but have existed for at least 150 years – or more. For example, the Highland Games of Detroit have been in existence since 1849³⁰, and the Highland Games of Chicago are even four years older. The Illinois Saint Andrew Society does not only ascribe to tartanism, there is genuine interest in Gaelic among their members. And this may be rare, but it is by no means unique. The Annual Pacific Northwest Scottish Highland Games and Clan Gathering in Seattle WA was founded under the name of 'Seattle Scottish Highland Games' in 1947, one year after the aforementioned Games in Fergus, ON, and what information may be gleaned from their website sounds fairly like plain tartantry to the initiated³¹. At the same time, Seattle has a vibrant Gaelic scene which has some substantial credibility in the Gaelic world, not only in neighboring Canada but also in the Scottish motherland³². But of those Americans with a genuine interest in Gaelic language and culture, there is usually a remarkable absence at mainstream Scottish heritage events, as they have taken a rather dim view of such activities³³. Saying that, many of them have initially been part of the mainstream Scottish-American heritage movement and were thus drawn

²⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

²⁷ Jarvie, 2003: section (V): Scottish Highland Gatherings and Games as North American Scottish Culture.

²⁸ Hepburn, Wayne (2000) 'The Fergus Scottish Festival and Highland Games: Keeping Scottishness Alive in Town', *Scottish Tradition* Vol. 25 (2000), pp. 88-105.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 91.

³⁰ Jarvie, 2003: section (V).

³¹ Our History. Seattle Scottish Highland Games Association. May 23th 2019, retrieved from: <http://www.sshga.org/association/ourHistory.htm>

³² Newton, 2005, pp. 14-15.

³³ Newton, 2005: section 7, 'Tartanism Deposed', pp. 18-21.



towards genuine Gaelic culture, as the Celtic Twilight circuit is often the platform for discovering the real thing behind it.

There is also a Swiss diaspora abroad, especially in the United States, where there is a very large settlement of Swiss Americans in Wisconsin, viz. New Glarus, which was founded by settlers from the canton of Glarus in central Switzerland³⁴, who had crossed the Atlantic after many parts of Switzerland had been left destitute following an economic crisis in 1845 – this era was indeed a time of crisis in Swiss agriculture³⁵, which is not altogether surprising given that the 1840s were very harsh years due to the notorious potato famine which also struck continental Europe. Possibly, it had an impact on Switzerland too, but there were other reasons, too, as the industrial revolution was in full swing in Switzerland at that time. Many people had to emigrate, and many of them chose America or Australia for their destination. Whether there are any expatriate Unspunnen festivals to be found in the Swiss diaspora overseas shall be discussed later. For now, one ought to concentrate on the motherland and its rural games gatherings.

The so-called Unspunnenfest does not take place annually, unlike most Highland Gatherings, even though this was the original idea of the initiators. This will be discussed in more detail in the following section. The heavy or athletic events of Unspunnen consist of Schwingen (traditional Swiss wrestling) and Steinstossen (putting the stone), and there is usually traditional music and dance, singing and alphorn playing as well. In Scottish Highland terms, it sounds like a combination of a Highland gathering and a mòd³⁶ or a fèis³⁷. It appears, however, that the traditional dancing is not competitive as in the case of Scottish Highland dancing, and neither is the singing and alphorn playing as in the case of the Gaelic choirs at the Mòd or the pipers at mòdan and Highland Games. Apart from the Unspunnenfest, there are

³⁴ This Catholic canton has as its very patron saint the Gael Fridolin, an itinerant monk from Ireland or Scotland. Fridolin – Friedrich Wilhelm Bautz. Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon (BBKL), hrg. von F.W. Bautz (Nordhausen/ Thüringen: Verlag Traugott Bautz, 1990), Bd. II, Ss. 125-126.

³⁵ The economy: agriculture. May 23th 2019, retrieved from:
<https://www.eda.admin.ch/aboutswitzerland/en/home.html>

³⁶ Mòd = Scot. Gael. "assembly, court (of justice)", also an annual competition in Gaelic literature and music under the auspices of An Comunn Gàidhealach, founded 1891 in Oban, Argyll. There are provincial or regional mòdan, and the Royal National Mòd (Am Mòd Naiseanta Rìoghail), all based on the Welsh Eisteddfod but without the fancy druid costumes. The Royal National Mod: History. May 23th 2019, retrieved from: <http://www.acgmod.org/nationalmod/history>

³⁷ Fèis in Dwelly. May 23th 2019, retrieved from:

<http://www.cairnwater.co.uk/gaelicdictionary/index.aspx?txtSearch=f%u00e8is> In the contemporary sense, *fèisean* are Scotland-wide celebrations of Gaelic culture and music including workshops to pass on the skills to younger generations according to the dictum "tradition is not about the passing around the ashes, it means passing on the flame". The Scottish *fèisean* movement is a fairly young one, conceived 1981 in the Isle of Barra where *Fèis Bharraigh* was organised by the local parish priest, Fr. Colin MacInnes (*An t-Athair Cailean Mac Aonghais*), parents and other individuals strongly in favour of Gaelic language and culture and preventing it from dying out. Ten years later, after more *fèisean* had been arranged in the *Gàidhealtachd* and the Lowland diaspora, the umbrella organisation *Fèisean nan Gàidheal* was founded. The language of instruction is of course Gaelic. 'What is a fèis?', *Fèisean nan Gàidheal*. Boyd Robertson, 'Gaelic in Scotland' in: Extra, Guus and Gorter, Durk (2001) *The other Languages of Europe: Demographic, Sociolinguistic, and Educational Perspectives*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, pp. 91-92.



various local Schwingfeste, similar ethnosport and folklore events such as the Eidgenössische Älpler-und Schwingfest which take place annually and all across Switzerland. While their main feature is traditional Swiss-style wrestling, they do not feature stone put yet also feature traditional Swiss costumes and music and dance. Nowadays, however, there is a certain American impact since some Schwingfeste have taken Country&Western bands into their schedule. This could be called a syncretist attitude. Other festivals of this kind, however, still prefer a more traditional approach in the manner of conservationists³⁸. The latter kind is rather accompanied by sounds closer to home such as yodelling, the Schwyzerörgeli (a kind of button accordion typical for Swiss traditional dance music) and cow bells (Treichlen, Trychlen)³⁹. The most important point here is that those rural games or ethnic sports festivals are primarily a community event, a local thing, not merely arranged for spectators from abroad or from neighbouring countries nor just for the amusement of city-dwellers wanting to take time off from their daily busy lives and crowded streets or railway platforms, but for the people of both rural and urban Switzerland⁴⁰. Visitors are welcome, but they do not play the first fiddle as they originally did in too many ways in the history of tourism in Switzerland⁴¹ – and in some cases still do⁴². In the next section it will be shown how wealthy tourists were wooed from the very first Unspunnen Festival in 1805 onwards. But the Swiss people have reclaimed this very event for themselves, and it is as much theirs now as their rural fairs and gatherings have always been. In this particular respect the Swiss have overtaken the Scots who have still not reclaimed their mainstream Highland Games festivals for themselves. Until fairly recently, the Unspunnen festival has even been a platform for political activism – the Unspunnen stone (the original stone having been used for stone put since 1805) has been stolen twice by a radical group of campaigners for an autonomous canton of Jura, the Béliers⁴³. While this matter is still controversial and should not be discussed here, especially not by an outsider, the idea itself is not quite original. It appears that the Béliers have done their homework well and studied the actions of radical campaigners from other minority groups: in 1950 on Christmas Day, four young Scots – one of whom, Cairiona "Kay" Matheson⁴⁴, was a Gael – removed the alleged Stone of Destiny from the Coronation Throne in Westminster Abbey. Actually, the Scottish Highland Games could do with some political activism, too, as long as it manifests itself in the shape of harmless yet subversive pranks and does not involve violence.

Whether these games and the gatherings around them ever played a role among the Swiss expatriates overseas and their descendants – and found success with the other ethnicities around them - in the same way as the Scottish Highland

³⁸ Festprogramm. Innerschweizer Schwing-und Älplerfest Muotathal (advert), Schlussgang Nr. 10, 3. Jg. (28. Juni 2006), s. 22.

³⁹ Schwing- und Älplerfest auf Rigi Staffel. Sonntag, 9. Juli 2006. May 23th 2019, retrieved from: <http://rigi-schwingen.ch/>

⁴⁰ Festprogramm. Ibid, s. 26.

⁴¹ Bendix, 1989, pp. 136, 140.

⁴² Schmidt, Aurel (1990) Die Alpen: Schleichende Zerstörung eines Mythos. Zürich: Benziger, s. 225-26, 231, 236-38, 270-77.

⁴³ Strebel, Etienne. Unspunnen: Stein des Anstosses. May 23th 2019, retrieved from: http://www.swissinfo.ch/ger/Unspunnen:_Stein_des_Anstosses.html?cid=4341782

⁴⁴ Cairiona Nic Mhathain in Gaelic.



Games did will now be discussed in the remainder of this section. The author's research tell another story – there are only two [sic!] Swiss-American festivals which feature Steinstossen, namely the Sugar Creek Swiss Festival in Sugar Creek, Ohio and the German-American Festival [sic!] in Toledo, also in Ohio. None of these two or any other festival in Swiss America list Schwingen as one of their events, though, save the Californian Swiss: the Holtville Swiss Club hold an annual Schwingfest, and so do the Aelpler Gruppe Swiss Club in Newark and the San Joaquin Valley Swiss Club in Ripon. The renowned American ethnologist Wayland Debs Hand even wrote an article about Schwingen in California⁴⁵. Schwingen also takes place in Oregon and the State of Washington in the Pacific Northwest, but east of the Rocky Mountains there only seems to be a Swiss Schwingen scene in Quebec in Canada, yet strangely not in the aforementioned Swiss colonies in Ohio. Even more remarkable is the absence of both Schwingen and Steinstossen in the greatest Swiss colony in Midwest, viz. New Glarus ("Nüglaris"). California has had a strong Swiss immigrant tradition since the early 19th century, the days of John A. Sutter (1803-80) and his vast estate New Helvetia which flourished until gold was found in his vicinity in 1848. New Glarus was founded in the 1840s, but that does not explain the absence of traditional Swiss sports there today – nor does the context of New Helvetia really explain the presence of Schwingfeste there in our age.

Quebec as a mainly francophone Canadian province – la belle Province – should naturally attract emigrants from the Romandie, and yet Schwingen is a mainly German Swiss athletic discipline. According to the Swiss Historical Lexicon, however, this sport has also spread to parts of the francophone areas of Switzerland, e.g. Fribourg. The latter canton is bilingual, its eponymous principal city also bears the German name Freiburg im Üechtland. The German-speaking part of Freiburg is known as the Sense district, its inhabitants as the Sensler⁴⁶. The region has contributed renowned athletes to Schwingen, e.g. Michael Nydegger, and with two communities living together that closely; it is not surprising that the francophone denizens of Fribourg have adopted Schwingen. And those who emigrated to Quebec took it there. This province is not the only part of Canada with a Swiss contingent of immigrants; some Swiss people went further west⁴⁷. There is a Swiss-Fest in Banff, organised by a yodelling club named Heimattreu based in Calgary, Alberta. The place-names of these urban settlements show that they were founded by Scots, Gaels even in the case of Calgary⁴⁸. And this is not the only case in Canada of Swiss people settling down quite close to Scottish Gaels – in the middle of the 19th century Swiss settlers gathered at the Red River Settlement also known as Assiniboia originally founded by Lord Selkirk for impoverished Scottish fellow country people, most of whom were Gaels, the Lord

⁴⁵ Wayland Debs Hand (1943) Schweizer Schwingen: Swiss Wrestling in California', California Folklore Quarterly, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Apr. 1943), pp. 77-84.

⁴⁶ 'Seissler' in the local dialect, the Seisslerdütsch.

⁴⁷ Aebischer, Rafael (2006) Mann des Tages: Michael Nydegger (20, Sense)', Schlussgang Nr. 10, 3. Jg. (Juni 2006), s. 8.

⁴⁸ Banff was named after the home town of its founder, Banff in the Northeast of Scotland, formerly the principal town of Banffshire and now part of Aberdeenshire. The founder of the town was a director of the Canadian Pacific Railway born in Banffshire, Lord Steven. See: Moor, Corinne (2009) Das Swiss-Fest in Banff, Bauernzeitung (Juli 10, 2009), s. 17.



himself was a Lowland Scot⁴⁹. But the Red River Colony broke up in disaster and warlike strife, and most of the Scottish and Swiss settlers went to other places⁵⁰, the Swiss mainly south across the US border. Thus, there is not much Swiss heritage left in that part of Manitoba. In the whole of this province, there are only two Swiss associations. Currently there are no records whether they hold Schwingfeste or other festivals of traditional Swiss athletics.

This section was about the role of Scottish Highland Games and Swiss rural sports and their role in today's communities both at home and in the diaspora overseas. The outcome of this section is just as homogenous as the folk culture regarding Scotland and Switzerland – not at all, and the same applies to the celebrations of Scottish and Swiss heritage in the USA and in Canada. Some appear to keep up traditions without making any concessions to ersatz or kitsch culture and try to remain as down to earth as possible, especially the Schwingers in California and Canada in the Swiss context, whereas in the Scottish context overseas there seems to be a division between genuine Gaelophiles who either do not attend Highland Games at all or only in scarce numbers. Most Scots-Canadians and Scots-Americans, however, celebrate the travesty of Scottish heritage known as Highlandism or tartanism – and their Highland Games are every inch a manifestation of that kind of surrogate heritage. Many Swiss-Americans and Swiss-Canadians have also yielded to a tokenist Swiss heritage which could be described as the Swiss(-American) equivalent of tartanry. Maybe one should speak of Edelweissery and Heidiyism, some speak of "Disneyfication" of Swiss traditions. Certainly a typical candidate for such a Swiss Disneyland is New Glarus in Wisconsin with its annual Heidi Festival and its artificial chalets, even their phone boxes are dressed up in chalet style⁵¹. But before the Americans are blamed overly much for creating such travesties of Scottish and Swiss or any other European culture, it will be shown that those travesties began in Europe as a matter of fact – in the next section about the creation of the modern Scottish Highland Games and the Unspunnen festival in the 19th century.

Scottish and Swiss Rural Games and Pastimes in the 19th Century, their Origins and the serious Game of Politics

A smaller nation of proud yeoman farmers and mountain herdsfolk has been occupied and governed by a big neighbouring nation having written on her banners to "liberate" all the other nations in the neighbourhood and overthrow all the local tyrants in the name of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* (liberty, equality and fraternity). And indeed, for the rural population of a mountainous part of the smaller nation concerned here – having long felt oppressed and patronised by the urban aristocracy of their principal city – it seems as if a new age has broken. For the first time, they are enjoying the very values the foreign usurpers have promised to bring and which were not possible under

⁴⁹ Miles MacDonell in Dictionary of Canadian Biography. May 23th 2019, retrieved from: http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=2986 and Swiss Americans: Nineteenth Century Settlements. Countries and their Cultures. May 23th 2019, retrieved from: <http://www.everyculture.com/multi/Sr-Z/Swiss-Americans.html>

⁵⁰ Stobie, Margaret. Backgrounds of the Dialect called Bungi. MHS (Manitoba Historical Society). Transactions Series vol. 3, no. 24 (1967-68), May 23th 2019, retrieved from: <http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/transactions/3/bungidialect.shtml>

⁵¹ Treichler, Robert (1989) New Glarus: "Was für Hösli?", Globo Nr. 6 (Juni 1989), S. 81.



the aristocracy that had hitherto governed them. The main group benefiting from the new era is the middle class: scholars, teachers and tradespeople, and last but not least the wealthy yet not rich farmers who had until then suffered the rule of the gentry. Then, all of a sudden, conditions change, the local reformers are split and the foreign power begins to withdraw its troops – and the new democratic local governments with all their equality and liberty collapse, much to the glee of the representants of the old system, the *ancien régime*. The latter are of course interested to return to their former glory, at the same time they know that now that their former subjects have tasted a good amount of the previously forbidden fruit named liberty will not be as easy to rule as before. Thus, they install a system of surveillance to keep the intelligentsia imbued with the new spirit in check. Opposition to the reaction is either intimidated or expelled by force. The old ruling class intends to restore the old ties that used to bind the mountainous hinterland to their city, and they have to act wisely without provoking armed resistance and civil war, well aware of the growing hostility towards them and the futility to suppress the liberal powers in the long term. What better to do then but to resort to the ancient Roman idea of engendering peace by *panem et circenses*, dressed up in local costume? Enter the Unspunnenfest.

And apart from the pacifying aspect, it serves as the perfect medium to increase the amount of travellers to Switzerland, the smaller nation alluded to here. All the current celebrities of the age are invited to come and spread the word, it is the age of childhood of the modern phenomenon of tourism, after all – and the local people revive their ancient sports and pastimes to stage a show of a predominantly rural country inhabited by loyal and quaint peasants⁵². This may be a fairly simplified account of the genesis of the biggest folkloristic event in the Interlaken area, yet space and time do not allow a more detailed depiction. Besides, more profound accounts of the history of the Unspunnen festival have already been written recently, such as the book by Rudolf Gallati and Christoph Wyss, *Unspunnen 1805–2005: Die Geschichte der Alpirtenfeste*. Neither is it the intention of the author to provide such a narrative, but rather a synopsis in order to demonstrate the contrast of what the Unspunnenfest is today and to show the European background of pompous Swiss-American displays of heritage. The background story to the Unspunnenfest will sound familiar and yet different to an enlightened Scottish Highland reader, and for the purpose of illustrativeness for other readers yet another scenario shall be drawn:

Another small nation in an island and a satellite archipelago, having been stateless since the amalgamation of its historic parliament with that of the more powerful neighbouring nation with which the smaller nation here concerned has been in perpetual hostility for centuries, has been haunted by yet another outbreak of war as many times before – albeit with a difference: the most recent armed conflict which has shaken both nations was not a real war fully backed by all local rulers and most of the population, but merely a rebellion initiated by the adherents of an ousted royal dynasty having originated in the smaller country but once dominated both countries for a while. The majority of the supporters of the old dynasty in the smaller nation are the gentry of a cultural minority in their own country, living in a remote rugged area secluded from the rest of the country by moors and mountains, and speaking a language hearkening back to the older days of their nation when they themselves ruled the whole country.

⁵² Fish Howell, Charles (1912) *Around the Clock in Europe*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, pp. 282-283.



The majority of this nation lives in the lowlands, though, and has gradually adopted the language and the culture of the neighboring nation, especially their gentry and patricians who are loyal adherents of the new royal dynasty. Moreover, some chieftains of the despised cultural minority have also become loyal adherents of the current dynasty in order to achieve more power and respectability. The defeat of the rebels has brought great devastation and thus, more desperation and destitution – and harsh retribution – over the small nation, and even some of the former rebel chieftains are turning away from their subjects whom they formerly regarded as their kinsfolk according to their tradition. However, as they have newly adopted the more commercial outlook of their lowland peers, their clansfolk are by now merely seen as a burden standing in the way of economic progress. This should also sound fairly topical to many employees today, as the new age in the history of the small island nation marked the final shift from a patriarchal society to an individualistic capitalist society. Thus, the native middle class of the minority here concerned was ousted by newcomers from the lowlands and the neighbouring bigger nation, who aided the now commercialised gentry in evicting the native population from their ancient townships in the highlands of the small nation. Most of them were forced to emigrate to the colonies overseas the bigger nation had already established or taken over from yet other nations. Many of those perished on the way, and the remainders at home were largely reduced to a downtrodden and lethargic state, though there were still some who sought to rekindle resistance and the spirit of freedom. In the meantime, the central government had changed and Zeitgeist also – it was suddenly fashionable among the gentry to regard the formerly despised minority now deprived of their homes and the symbols of their culture as noble savages. According to the philosophy of a thinker from the other small mountainous nation mentioned above⁵³, those who had hitherto been regarded as uncouth barbarians and brutes were now reported to be a most noble and romantic, spartanically modest yet proud people – while many of them were still being forcefully evicted from their lands as an unwelcome burden. Society had not become freer nor more liberal, just more morally ambiguous. The new outlook on the downtrodden highland people was merely a manifestation of the new double standards of a brave new world where commercial success would count more than kinship, culture and hereditary rights⁵⁴. The new gentry thought of a way of exploiting the newly-awakened interest in travelling for leisure while keeping their remaining tenants in check at the same time and conceived festivals at which the iconic symbols of the subdued and now romanticised people were paraded to the pleasure of their affluent guests. Enter the Highland Games. Of course, the subdued people in the little scenario here are the Gaels of the Highlands of Scotland. Traditionally, they would hold clan musterings and livestock fairs where they would not only barter for cattle or sheep and exchange news, but also engage in athletic feats and games brought to the country by their forefathers

⁵³ The thinker alluded to here is of course Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) who fostered the idea of the noble savage in his writings such as the *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755), "discourse on the origin and the foundations of inequality among humankind" in: Vaughan, Charles Edwyn (1915) *The Political Writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau*, edited from the Original Manuscripts and Authentic Editions (Cambridge: The University Press, pp. 125-220.

⁵⁴ Newton, Michael (2000) *A Gaelic History of Scotland: Final conflict. A Handbook of the Scottish Gaelic World*, pp. 64-74.



who had once settled the country from Ireland – though it is likely that the Celtic tribes inhabiting Scotland before the Gaels, the Caledonii or Pretani now known as the Picts, also knew some of them already. Those activities were, among others, putting the stone⁵⁵, wrestling and stick and ball games such as shinty⁵⁶. The latter is a Gaelic prototype of hockey known in its original language as *camanachd* and *ioman*, its Irish version is called *iománaíocht*. It was traditionally played at Christmas and Hogmanay or New Year's Eve (*Oidhche Challainn* in Scottish Gaelic) and is regarded as the national game of the Gael⁵⁷. The world-famous tossing of the caber or tree-trunk is a more recent addition to Scottish Highland Games, though it also has genuine roots in Gaelic tradition as a pastime of lumbermen and joiners⁵⁸. Most of these games were not mere pastimes, though, but were originally also training for armed combat, which most likely also applies to their equivalents in Switzerland. Both Scots and Swiss highlanders have always been familiar with battle and swordplay and have a long record of mercenary service in foreign armies, especially in the French armed forces, from late medieval times onwards⁵⁹.

In the early nineteenth century, however, those athletic feats and games were turned into plain entertainment for lairds and their guests. One of the first great Highland Gatherings in their modern manifestation was the Strathfillan Games at St. Fillans in Perthshire in 1826 on the estate of Charles Edward Drummond, 5th Earl and Duke Melfort and 10th Duke of Perth⁶⁰. Ironically, these games were initiated by the Lord's Anglo-Welsh son-in-law, Peter Robert Burrell (1782–1865), 21st Baron Willoughby de Eresby and 2nd Baron Gwydir, who had married Clementina (1786–1865), the daughter and sole heir of Lord Perth. It is said that he founded these games for the people on his estates, yet it is not clarified whether that means the local crofters, i.e. his tenants – or rather for the amusement of the upper hierarchy of the estate.

⁵⁵ Stone put has existed in Gaelic tradition for a long time. It is mentioned in an eighth-century Irish law text relating to sports and pastimes, *mellbretha*, among others sports still practised by Irish and Scottish Gaels alike. Binchy, D.A. (1968) *Mellbretha*, *Celtica VIII*, pp. 144-154.

⁵⁶ According to the seventeenth-century Wardlaw Manuscript, a history of Clan Fraser compiled in Scots, wrestling was part of young Highlanders' education as much as swordplay, swimming, archery, football, throwing the bar (= tossing the caber?) and dancing. James Fraser, *Chronicles of the Frasers; the Wardlaw manuscript entitled: Polichronicon seu policratica temporum, or, the true genealogy of the Frasers, 916-1674*, edited by William Mackay. Edinburgh: University Press and The Scottish History Society, 1905, pp. 171, 481.

⁵⁷ Grant, Isabel F. (1995) *Highland Folk Ways*, 2nd edn. Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd., pp. 348-49. Cf. MacLennan, Hugh Dan (1998) *Shinty's Place and Space in World Sport*. *The Sports Historian* No. 18,1 (May, 1998), pp. 1-23.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* Grant, p. 345.

⁵⁹ In terms of military history, Scottish and Swiss highlanders have one thing in common: they reinvented the infantry, defeating heavily armoured cavalry in the shape of mounted knights at Stirling Bridge (Bannockburn (1314, in Gaelic, this battle is known as *Blar Allt a' Bhonnaich*) in the Scottish context, and at Morgarten (1315) and Sempach (1386) in the Swiss context. See: Bruce, Robert: *And the Community of the Realm of Scotland* 4th Revised edition by G.W.S. Barrow. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005.

⁶⁰ Grant, 1995, p. 345. Cf. Engraving of the Highland Games at St Fillans, Loch Earn, Perthshire, early 19th century. National Museums of Scotland. May 23th 2019, retrieved from: <http://nms.scran.ac.uk/database/record.php?usi=000-000-579-552-C&PHPSESSID=efjt0lq9ief540fub09ibo8dc1>



According to another source, a Highland laird is reported to have organised shinty matches not for the pleasure of his crofters, but mainly for amusing his aristocratic guests⁶¹. His tenants might actually have enjoyed the games had they been arranged for themselves, as it did indeed happen on some estates – not every Highland laird was a cold-hearted and ruthless bully given to the eviction of his clansmen, even though this might contradict certain ideologies⁶². When Queen Victoria attended the Braemar Gathering in 1849, Scottish Highland Games acquired the stamp of respectability – and this event marked the beginning of the meanwhile long tradition of the Royal Family attending the games in Braemar together with many other representants of the British upper class. Since then, the Braemar, the Lonach and the Argyll Gathering in Oban have been in the same league with Ascot and Epsom as already indicated further above⁶³.

The Swiss traditional games such as Schwingen and Steinstossen also hearken back to times older than the nineteenth century and have already been recorded in medieval times. For example, Schwingen has been known in its most archaic form at least since the thirteenth century, but only since the 1600s it has been recorded as a kind of wrestling most typical for the pastoral society of the Swiss upland. Steinstossen has been recorded since late medieval times, e.g. at the Schützenfest⁶⁴ in Zurich in 1472. In the Middle Ages, it would be practised by country folk and townfolk alike, yet by the eighteenth century it is mentioned by travel writers exclusively as a sport of alpine herdsfolk. As in the Scottish case, these feats would be performed mainly at country fairs and during the summer season, when the farmers' livestock would be driven to the upland shielings or when the rural population would celebrate the summer solstice (midsummer)⁶⁵. Like the archaic stick and ball game known as Hornussen, which has been recorded since the 1600s but equally goes back to the medieval era, Schwingen is most closely associated with the Bernese uplands, the Oberland and the Emmental (valley of the River Emme), and the Entlebuch in the canton of Lucerne.

However, it is now found all over Switzerland. Likewise, there are regional variations of Hornussen in the Valais and in Grisons (or Graubunden), e.g. the Gilihüsine in Betten VS, or the Tsara and Tschärättä, also in the Valais⁶⁶. In Grisons, a similar game is known as Gerla or Hora⁶⁷. These games seem to be the Swiss equivalents of shinty or camanachd, yet they are not necessarily part of the Unspunnen

⁶¹ Reid, Irene A. (2000) *Shinty, Nationalism and Cultural Identity, 1835-1939: A Critical Analysis*, PhD thesis. University of Stirling, p. 163.

⁶² Reid, op. cit., 2000, pp. 155-163.

⁶³ Jarvie, G. and Reid, I.A. (1999) *Sport, Nationalism and Culture in Scotland*, *The Sports Historian* Vol. 1, No. 19 (May 1999), p. 110.

⁶⁴ Schützenfest = fair at which the main event is competition between marksmen, be that archers, crossbowmen or gunners. Author's translation.

⁶⁵ Treichler, Robert. *Nationalspiele der Schweiz*. May 23th 2019, retrieved from: <http://www.hls-dhs-dss.ch/textes/d/D16328.php> The Swiss summer pastures are known as *Alpe*, which is originally a Celtic or possibly even older word sharing the same stem with the name of the whole southern Central European mountain range. Cf. Rousset, Paul-Louis (1988) *Les Alpes & leurs noms de lieux. 6000 ans d'histoire? Les Alpes & leurs noms de lieux. 6000 ans d'histoire? Les appellations d'origine pré-Indo-Européenne*. Paris: Didier & Richard, 1988.

⁶⁶ Hoffmann-Krayer, Eduard (1940) *Feste und Bräuche des Schweizervolkes*. Zürich: Atlantis, 1940. Repr. Edition Olms, 1992, s. 70-71.

⁶⁷ Robert Treichler, *ibid*.



festival or other alpine folk olympics, whereas shinty may be found at some Scottish Highland gatherings such as the Cowal Gathering in southern Argyll, which is actually a mainstream item of its kind⁶⁸. But it is still a West Highland gathering, and as such situated in an area which has always been a stronghold of shinty. In fact, when the committee of the said games announced in 2007 that they would abandon shinty among other athletic events in order to make more room for the piping events, they created a major controversy⁶⁹. After all, they had just reintroduced shinty seven years prior to that.

The regional games in the Highlands and the Hebrides still feature shinty, mainstream games do not. Shinty and Highland Games do not really always agree with each other, and though there were lairds who supported shinty clubs, it was considered subversive by some as it was played by crofters actively fighting for their rights⁷⁰. And yet, shinty as well as the athletic feats traditionally associated with the Scottish Gael all share the same origins, going back to the Oenach Tailten – the fair of Taitiu – in ancient Ireland⁷¹. The Tailteann Games, as this ancient festival is also known to scholars, are often said to have been an Irish equivalent of the Olympic games in ancient Greece. Indeed, the former are said to be even older: the ancient Olympic Games do not reach back earlier than 776 BC, whereas the Tailteann Games allegedly began in 1829 BC⁷². Admittedly the early history is shrouded in Gaelic mythological mist, as they are said to have been initiated by king Lugh (who was in fact the Celtic god Lug) in honour of his foster mother Taitiu⁷³, but the games did exist. There is evidence that they were held in early medieval Ireland⁷⁴, and the last games took place in the twelfth century prior to the Norman invasion of the country⁷⁵. The site of these events is now known as Teltown, Co. Meath, between Kells and Navan, and apart from the documentary evidence as studied by Irish scholars like Daniel Anthony Binchy (1899–1989) and Donnchadh Ó Corráin (1942–2017) and cited below, there is also archaeological evidence of great gatherings there⁷⁶. There was an attempt of Irish nationalists to revive the Tailteann Games in 1924 and 1932, but their effort proved

⁶⁸ Cowal Highland Gathering. May 23th 2019, retrieved from: <http://www.cowalgathering.com>

⁶⁹ Gill, Doug (2007) Cowal Gathering turns its back on track, Herald Scotland (19 May 2007). May 23th 2019, retrieved from: <http://www.heraldscotland.com/cowal-gathering-turns-its-back-on-track-1.858176>

⁷⁰ Reid, 2000, pp. 209-17. Cf. Caithnia, Liam Ó (1980) Scéal na h-Iomána. Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar Teoranta, lgh. 416-21, 731.

⁷¹ Nally, N.H. (1922) The Aonach Tailteann and the Tailteann Games. Dublin: Talbot, p. 21.

MacLennan, Hugh Dan (1998) Shinty's Place and Space in World Sport', *The Sports Historian* Vol. 1, No. 18 (May 1998), p. 4.

⁷² Diffley, Seán (2007) Tailteann Games place in history going for a song', *Irish Independent* (Sat, July 14 2007). May 23th 2019, retrieved from: <http://www.independent.ie/sport/other-sports/tailteann-games-place-in-history-going-for-a-song-1037527.html> Cf. Nally, 1922, pp. 26-35, and Watman, Melvyn F. (1968) *History of British Athletics*. London: Hale, 1968.

⁷³ 'Taitiu' in: Botheroyd, Sylvia und Paul F. (1995) *Lexikon der keltischen Mythologie*. München: Eugen Diederichs, S. 318.

⁷⁴ The last golden era of the Tailteann Games was the ninth century AD. MacNeill, Máire (1982) *The Festival of Lughnasa*. Dublin: Irish Folklore Commission, pp. 329, 331-32.

⁷⁵ Nally, 1922, pp. 34-35.

⁷⁶ Harbison, Peter (1990) Klöster, Burgen und Paläste: Ein historischer Überblick über die Baudenkmäler ' in: Albrecht Steinecke (Hg.), *Irland*. Leer: Mundo Verlag, S. 177.



less lasting than the Highland Games of their Scottish cousins and neighbours⁷⁷. Yet, while they did not manage to revive the old games in the old spirit, apparently the Tailteann Games have become a generic term in Ireland in our days for modern inter-provincial athletics competitions⁷⁸. Those, however, do not feature ethnic sports but international or mainstream athletics. The truth about the mythological foundations of the old gathering at Tailtiu is that they were strongly connected with the old quarter day of Lughnasa, which roughly corresponds to the first day of August according to our calendar today and which now is the term for August in Irish Gaelic. In Scottish Gaelic, it is Lùnasdal⁷⁹. The classical Tailteann Games would start a fortnight before Lughnasa, and finish a fortnight afterwards⁸⁰. As has already been mentioned above, wrestling was also a part of these games, and would still be a feature when the Oenach Tailten had given way to a vernacular fair near the old site and had thus returned to its origins, as it had most likely evolved from a religious fair of Bronze Age farmers. Later fairs in places all around Ireland and Gaelic Scotland still had a strong Lughnasa connection, even though they had been remodelled as festival days dedicated to Christian saints – more often than not with a syncretistic background⁸¹. Even today, most summer festivals in Ireland and Highland Scotland take place around the end of July and early August⁸², though the mainstream Highland Games take place until Mid-September, in the New World even in October⁸³.

Wrestling at Highland Games is thus not a recent adoption adopted from or inspired by external sources, as the uninitiated may surmise, but has a long-standing tradition in the Gaelic world. Apart from the aforementioned shinty, it was very popular among young Uidhistich in the 1900s⁸⁴. The Gaelic term for wrestling is carachd⁸⁵. Today, there are two main Gaelic styles, carachd Bharraigh and carachd Uidhist, Barra and Uist wrestling. Most Scottish wrestling styles are backhold styles as opposed to Swiss Schwingen, which is a belt and jacket style⁸⁶. They are not mere derivations of

⁷⁷ MacKillop, 1998: *ibid.* Cf. Biege, Bernd. The Tailteann Games: An Olympic Event for the "Celtic Race", May 23th 2019, retrieved from:

http://goireland.about.com/od/historyculture/qt/gg_tailteann.htm

⁷⁸ Ireland by Region. May 23th 2019, retrieved from:

<http://www.irelandwide.com/regional/leinster/index.htm>

⁷⁹ MacNeill, 1982: vol. I, pp. 322-23; 120-21; 122-23. Dwelly, *td.* 610.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 337.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, Ch. XIV, pp. 287f., cf. Appendix IV.

⁸² 'Mull Games', South Uist Games and North Uist Games. Scotland's Highland Games. May 23th 2019, retrieved from: http://www.albagames.co.uk/Highland_games2000.htm#SOUTH Barra Games, Scotland's Highland Games. May 23th 2019, retrieved from:

http://www.albagames.co.uk/Highland_games2000.htm#BARRA

⁸³ The Braemar Gathering. May 23th 2019, retrieved from: <http://www.braemargathering.org/> Invercharron Highland Games. May 23th 2019, retrieved from:

<http://www.invercharrongames.co.uk/>

⁸⁴ Morrison, Alastair (1908) 'Uist Games', *The Celtic Review*, vol. IV (July 1907-April 1908), pp. 361-71, especially p. 370.

⁸⁵ Dwelly, *td.* 167 *agus.* May 23th 2019, retrieved from:

<http://www.cairnwater.co.uk/gaelicdictionary/?txtSearch=carachd>

⁸⁶ Sayenga, Donald (1995) 'The Problem of Wrestling "Styles" in the modern Olympic Games – a Failure of Olympic Philosophy. *Citius, Altius, Fortius*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Autumn 1995), pp. 22-23, 25; cf.



English styles, as some sources purport⁸⁷. In the past, it could come to serious blows among youths engaged in a wrestling match, according to Sir Eneas Mackintosh who wrote in the late eighteenth century⁸⁸, something that supposedly does not occur in Schwingen⁸⁹. A great wrestler at Scottish Highland Games from the 1860s to the 1900s was Donald Dinnie (1837-1916) from Balnacraig near Aboyne in Aberdeenshire, who would also excel in other heavy events⁹⁰.

The following focus on musical contests at the Scottish Highland Games and the Swiss alp herders' games and wrestling festivals. In Scotland, this includes the competitions in piping and Highland Dancing, yet not all the dancing at Scottish Highland Gatherings is competitive. There are also Scottish balls and cèilidh dances at such gatherings, and they shall be discussed shortly. As befits the prominent place of piping or piobaireachd in traditional Gaelic society, the piping competitions shall be discussed first. In Switzerland, the equivalent of piping is alphorn playing, even though there was once also a piping tradition in parts of Switzerland⁹¹, and not just in the Romandie and among the Swiss Italians in Ticino and Southern Grisons, but also among the German Swiss. Scots will be surprised to learn that between the fifteenth and the sixteenth century, the bagpipe was even used in battle by Swiss mercenary troops just as much as by Gaelic warriors⁹². However, from the eighteenth century onwards, the pipes went out of use in Swiss lands apart from a few remote areas. Today, Swiss folk music is dominated by the button accordion known as the Schwyzerörgli, the "(hand) organ from the canton of Schwyz", and the fiddle also plays a prominent role, especially in the upper Valais and the northeastern parts of Switzerland. But in Swiss tradition, the bagpipes never achieved the same high prestige as at the courts of Gaelic chieftains and princes in Highland and Hebridean Scotland⁹³. Apparently, the alphorn first appeared in Switzerland in the sixteenth century.

Closely interwoven with piping is Highland Dancing, or whatever passes for it since the late eighteenth century. The Highland Dancing in capital letters most people get to see at Highland Games nowadays is not the genuine dancing of Gaelic society,

Huggins, Mike (2001) The regular re-invention of sporting tradition and identity. *The Sports Historian*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (May 2001), pp. 41-42, 50-51.

⁸⁷ Poliakoff, Michael B. (1996) Wrestling, Freestyle from *Encyclopedia of World Sport: From Ancient Times to the Present* eds. David Levinson and Karen Christensen. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., Vol. 3, p. 1190.

⁸⁸ Grant, 1995, p. 344.

⁸⁹ Reichlin, Daniel. Coach with Schwingclub Zurich, in 'Wrestling with Tradition', May 23th 2019, retrieved from: <http://www.nachbarsport.de/schwingen.html>

⁹⁰ Dinnie, Donald (1999) *The First Sporting Superstar*. Ardo Publishing, 1999. *Iron Game History*, Vol. 7, Nos. 2&3 (July 2002), pp. 31-32.

⁹¹ Klauser, Urs. *Die Sackpfeife in der Schweiz*. Schweizer Sackpfeifen. May 23th 2019, retrieved from: <http://www.tritonius.ch/Schweizer%20Sackpfeifen/sackpfeifen%20in%20der%20schweiz.htm#die%20sackpfeife%20in%20der%20schweiz>

⁹² Graf, Urs. *Reisläufer'* (Swiss mercenary), ink drawing of 1525. May 23th 2019, retrieved from: <http://www.tritonius.ch/Schweizer%20Sackpfeifen/urs%20graf.htm>

⁹³ Weetering, Senta van de (2003) *Dudelsack: Typisch Schweiz'*, *St. Galler Tagblatt* (4.12.2003). May 23th 2019, retrieved from: <http://www.tritonius.ch/Schweizer%20Sackpfeifen/sackpfeifen.htm>



but merely an artificial and stilted form of it adjusted to external aesthetics⁹⁴. In other words, it is what outsiders from the Lowlands and from England perceived to be Highland dancing and is not any more authentic than the Irish stepdancing as performed by Michael Flatley et al. is authentic Irish stepdancing such as rince sean-nós in Connemara⁹⁵, to name but one example. Competitive Highland Dancing, like its Irish counterpart, is a curious mixture of ballet and regimental dances as performed by Highland soldiers in camps all over the Empire. Formalised and standardised, it is no longer a community dance tradition and exists merely for the sake of the Mòd and Highland Games⁹⁶. If one wishes to see authentic step dancing of the Scottish Gael, the Hebridean dances as performed by Dannsa as well as preserved by the Gaelic settlers in Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, and Codroy Valley, Newfoundland, are much closer to the original tradition⁹⁷. Similarly, the phenomenon known today as Scottish Country Dancing, also a fairly stilted Victorian genre, has never really been a vernacular Scottish way of dancing. It evolved out of eighteenth – and nineteenth-century social dances of the gentry such as contradances, quadrilles, etc. and has still remained elitist, except that it has been tartanised and formal Highland dress is always worn with it⁹⁸. One should always be wary of capital letters regarding folklore and fakelore. The real Scottish country dancing still popular today with young people and older people alike, and with both Highlanders and Lowlanders, is cèilidh dancing. This is a mixture of Scottish folk dances such as the reel, the strathspey, the jig, the hornpipe and the two-step, continental rural dances such as the polka and the waltz and North American dances such as the barn dance, the Virginia Reel etc. Cèilidh is the Gaelic word for a 'social night', originally, cèilidhean were gatherings during long winter nights where songs would be sung, stories would be told and some dancing would be done, while people would still be doing household chores such as carding, spinning, sewing etc. Today, and especially since the 1960s-70s folk revival, cèilidhean or ceilidhs (in anglicised plural) are a widespread Scottish weekend entertainment in rural as well as in urban areas, at village halls as well as at university halls and town or city venues from Edinburgh to Wick⁹⁹. While it is not uncommon to wear Highland dress at a cèilidh, it is not compulsory. In general, people attend village hall ceilidhs in their street clothes, and the same applies to ceilidhs at Highland Games. Mainly the West Highland Gatherings and the Hebridean Games feature ceilidhs, e.g. in Barra and the Uists. The aforementioned Cowal Gathering features a big ceilidh tent. A ceilidh dance is not as

⁹⁴ Newton, 2000, p. 281-82; Grant, 1995, pp. 350-54. Cf. MacInnes, John (1994) *Dance in Gaelic society*. Thomson, pp. 56-59.

⁹⁵ Kieran, Jordan (1998) *Sean Nys Step Dancing – It's a Living Tradition*. The Boston Irish Reporter (August 31, 1998). May 23th 2019, retrieved from: http://www.celticcafe.com/archive/Dance/Articles/SeanNos_BostonIrishReporter.htm The author knew the man himself, having met him at An Chistín during his Irish language courses in An Cheathrú Rua, also in Connemara.

⁹⁶ Morrison, Cecily (2003) *Culture at the Core: Invented Traditions and Imagined Communities, Part I: Identity Formation*. International Review of Scottish Studies Vol. 28 (2003), pp. 11, 15-16.

⁹⁷ About Us. Dannsa. May 23th 2019, retrieved from: http://www.dannsa.com/about_us.asp Cf. Bennet, Margaret. *Step-dancing: Why we must learn from past mistakes*. May 23th 2019, retrieved from: http://www.siliconglen.com/Scotland/10_3.html

⁹⁸ Morrison, 2003, pp. 9-10, 12-14.

⁹⁹ Morrison, 2003, pp. 10-11, 18-19. Cf. Mike's Community. May 23th 2019, retrieved from: <http://mikescommunity.com/>



formal as Scottish Country Dancing, it is rather informal and thus more attractive to younger people. Besides, Scottish people are generally less class-aware than English people. Scottish society has always been rather egalitarian, and therefore most Scots shun elitist activities such as Scottish Country Dancing which was imposed from outside. Ceilidh dancing is also more syncretist, whereas Country Dancing is staunchly conservative. Typical ceilidh dances are the Gay Gordons (a quickstep), the Dashing White Sergeant (in reel time), the Highland Schottische (strathspey) and the Strip the Willow (in jig time)¹⁰⁰. The first example mentioned here is a couple dance, the second one a set dance, the third another couple dance and the fourth one another set dance¹⁰¹.

Swiss traditional dances have something in common with Scottish Country Dancing and ceilidh dancing, inasmuch as most popular folk dances now stem from the eighteenth and the nineteenth century. Also, there is in Switzerland a folk dance named the Schottisch which is closely related to the Highland Schottische in Scotland. But here, the similarities end. While Swiss folk dances have been widely adopted by the various rural communities in the past, today they are a tradition on display. This means that they are only performed at festivals such as the Unspunnenfest or the alpine Schwingfeste such as the one on the Brünig Pass above Meiringen in the Bernese Oberland, and traditions on display are no longer really live traditions. Unlike a ceilidh dance, Swiss folk dance events are closed events in which only members of an association dedicated to the fosterage of folk dances can participate. Ceilidhs are open to all, and the dances can be learned by doing in one night without any previous experience in folk dancing. Swiss folk dances are more formal in nature not unlike Scottish Country dancing and, like German folk dances, take a lot of practice to be done because of the many figures¹⁰². The Swiss folk dance revival – if it may be called such – began in the early 1930s among the pioneers of the Swiss regional costume movement. At first, they did not even think about dancing. It was not until two ladies of the Swiss Association for Regional Costumes attended two week-long traditional song workshops in Germany in 1928 and 1932 that they realised the strong connection between regional attire and country dances¹⁰³. But formal as Swiss vernacular dances may be, there is no Swiss equivalent of Highland Dancing, no highly stylised dance form or ballet disguised as vernacular step dance that exists merely for competition at festivals. Then again, it appears that there is no older tradition of rural step dance or clogging at all in Switzerland, though the author would welcome any comment pointing towards the opposite.

Conclusion

¹⁰⁰ The Gay Gordons was the nickname of the Gordon Highlanders. The dance was originally called 'The Gordon Highlander's Quickstep' and is danced to 2/4 or 4/4 marches in allemande hold. The Gay Gordons. Grand Chain. May 23th 2019, retrieved from: <http://www.scottishdance.net/ceilidh/dances.html> The original name of the dance referred to a regimental march of the Gordon Highlanders in 4/4 rhythm.

¹⁰¹ Strip the Willow. May 23th 2019, retrieved from: <http://www.scottishdance.net/ceilidh/dances.html>

¹⁰² Klenk & Schmid-Kunz, Kap. I und II, S. 7-13.

¹⁰³ Ibid., S. 9.



Both the Swiss alpine herdsfolk festival in Unspunnen and the Scottish Highland Games in their modern attire known to most people locally and internationally were founded by the respective ruling class in order to quell unrest among the people whom they regarded as their subjects in a peaceful manner by applying the old principle of bread and games. In both cases, they failed – in Switzerland, there was open resistance against the Bernese patricians in 1814, so no further Unspunnenfeste were arranged until 1905. In Scotland, there was increased unrest among the Highland crofters from the late 1840s, the years of the potato famine, onwards, which culminated in violent outbreaks of resistance in the 1880s¹⁰⁴. In Switzerland, in the course of time the Unspunnenfest became a festival of the community, and most other folkloristic festivals created in the Interlaken area in recent years were also primarily invented for the community – while visitors from outside are not discouraged to enjoy them also¹⁰⁵. In Scotland, facts seem to suggest that most Highland Games are still more about commerce than about community, were it not for the many regional gatherings in smaller scale where the local community still plays a bigger part and the participating athletes are not "imports" from elsewhere – as is often the case at the large-scale events¹⁰⁶. Mainstream Highland Games are very much about commerce and social status, community Highland Games are not – they correspond to the general egalitarian outlook of Scottish society, as opposed to the class-awareness of English people and Anglo-Scots¹⁰⁷. Scottish and Swiss festivals in the North American diaspora often seem strange and overly exaggerated to people in the old countries, yet many Scots and Swiss abroad have been alienated from their original culture and adopted external attitudes to what celebrating their heritage ought to be like. As a Swiss travel journalist put it after having been to New Glarus, Wisconsin: "Whenever Americans try to act genuinely Swiss, they get stuck in the braces of Bavarian lederhosen"¹⁰⁸. In other words, after two or more generations of trying to fit in with the Anglo-American majority, it is hard to distinguish between Swiss-German and a part of German heritage, and equally it is difficult for many Americans to distinguish between Irish and Scottish heritage.

What, then, is one to make of Highland Games in continental Europe? Meanwhile, the phenomenon has spread across the whole of Europe and may be found from the Netherlands to the Czech Republic, and now even in Switzerland where the Wuy u Ay Highland Games have been staged in Saint-Ursanne since 2003. Is it mere tartanism, or is there any genuine interest in Scottish Highland culture behind it all? This question might well merit, and spawn, another study – and yet it should be possible to answer it right here: while there is some genuine interest in Gaelic culture in

¹⁰⁴ Donald MacAulay, 'Bernera Riot', in Thomson, 1994, p. 23 (in Bernera Lewis); Thomas M. Murchison, 'crofting system', Thomson, 1994, pp. 49-51; Murchison, 'Land League movement', *ibid.*, p. 146; James Hunter, 'politics, Highland', *ibid.*, pp. 237-38.

¹⁰⁵ Bendix, 1989, pp. 137-44.

¹⁰⁶ Jarvie, 2003: sections III and VI.

¹⁰⁷ Masson, Kimberley (2007) Fluid Boundaries of Belonging: 'Locals' and 'Incomers' in the Scottish Highlands. *Scottish Affairs*, No. 59 (Spring 2007), pp. 31-46.

¹⁰⁸ Jarvie, 2003: section V, cf. Jarvie and Reid, 1998: p. 393. Robert Treichler, 'New Glarus: "Was für Hösli?"', *Globo* Nr. 6 (Juni 1989), S. 81.



Switzerland,¹⁰⁹ the Saint-Ursanne Games have all the trappings of mainstream Highland Games in Scotland and North America etc., and any hints regarding authentic Gaelic culture or other rural Scottish culture are nowhere to be found on the festival's website. The festival's name is curious, wuy u ay being the equivalent of Gaelic suas agus sìos and Scots up and doon in Seislerdütsch, the locally-spoken dialect of Swiss German.¹¹⁰ But it also seems to hint at French oui and Scots aye, both meaning "yes". The festival does not have a ceilidh or a "tartan" or "heather ball" yet, the first of which would of course be more authentic. There is a Swiss branch of the Royal Scottish Country Dancing Society (RSCDS) in Berne¹¹¹, but even they have not yet reacted to the Saint-Ursanne Games. There, the focus seems to be on the heavy events and the piping, and one is tempted to speak of Swiss Älplerspiele in tartan disguise. The Saint-Ursanne Games are no longer alone in Switzerland, though – the people of Vals in Grisons have recently started their own Highland Games; the people of Fehraltorf in the canton of Zurich have had their Highland Games for ten years now and thus for three years longer than the people of Saint-Ursanne. The Fehraltorf Games feature Irish and Scottish traditional music, even bands from Scotland, but there is no mention of ceilidh dancing or anything Gaelic save their aid for a project initiated by the Clanranald Trust, Dùn Charruinn or 'Dun Carron'. The Clanranald Trust, however, appears to be a medieval re-enactment society, and so does the "Highlander's" society in Fehraltorf.

As regards matters medieval, it has been mentioned above that the bagpipe in Switzerland went out of use by the eighteenth century. It has been revived recently by Urs Klauser, and it is obvious that the impact of Irish and Scottish traditional music on continental Europe has much to answer for the current revival of medieval music in Germany and in Switzerland. However, even though there are people involved who are really serious about the concept of living history and the preservation of early music and song, one suspects that the whole medieval pageantry is just another phenomenon closely akin to tartanism and its equivalents in Switzerland and elsewhere. But is it merely tartanism that makes strapping young Swiss lads and bonnie Swiss lasses don Highland attire, and the romance of a man in a kilt, or is there more to it than meets the eye? Maybe this should be settled in another study, after all.

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¹⁰⁹ Tha mi às an Eilbheis. Am Bòrd-Brath, Deutsches Zentrum für Gälische Sprache und Kultur. May 23th 2019, retrieved from: <http://www.schottisch-gaelisch.de/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?t=1541>

¹¹⁰ So the author has been told by Dr. Paul Widmer, lecturer and research assistant in Comparative Philology at the University of Marburg, who hails from the Bernese-Fribourgian border.

¹¹¹ Or rather, there was. Any link to the club in Berne is no longer working: 'Scottish Country Dance Groups in Europe'. Grand Chain. May 23th 2019, retrieved from:

<http://www.scottishdance.net/groups/Europe.html> If they still exist, probably they are currently working on their website. Other links to Swiss Scottish Country Dancing Clubs do not work either.



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