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From the keening to the chanter:
Feminine lineage in Scottish lament

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Born into a family of traditional village musicians and poets from the Scottish village of Ballater, Margery Bray went on to pioneer trauma resolution in children internationally through the medium of play therapy. Her current focus is in the exploration of our keening and Highland bagpipe pìobaireachd *traditions as a form of musical medicine for grief and loss in society today.*

Abstract

This paper explores the theological and cultural lineage between the women's *caoineadh* (keening) traditions of pre-Reformation Scotland and the later development of the *pìobaireachd* lament. It argues that the suppression of keening by the seventeenth-century church silenced a feminine mode of communal grief-transformation, a function preserved in part through the bagpipe's *cumha* repertoire. Restoring balance between masculine and feminine energies in ritual music, it suggests, may recover heart-resonance and communal healing. The article traces the displacement of communal lament into Gaelic song and *pìobaireachd* as continuing vessels for grief and transformation.

Personal background and experience

Before beginning, it is important to establish the ground from which this paper is written. My life experience is as a bearer of culture rather than as a formally trained theologian or academic, although I have written extensively across several disciplines concerned with spirituality, trauma, and the role of sound in human resilience.

Born and brought up in Argyll, ours was a Highland family of traditional village singers, poets, and musicians from the Aberdeenshire village of Ballater in Upper Deeside. My mother tongue is Scots Doric. My mother, Betty Allan, sang from our tradition to me in the womb and on the breast. Sound and vibration were present from the outset not as ornament but as nourishment.

My early life also brought me into the bivvies (willow branch tents) of Scottish Traveller families, whose songs, ballads, and stories carried what I and ethnographic scholars such as Hamish Henderson and Margaret Bennett have come to recognise as an ancient and resilient songstream. These traditions were not taught formally, but absorbed through listening, repetition, and relational proximity.

Later, I worked internationally as a trauma specialist, accompanying traumatised children and communities fractured by conflict, displacement, and loss. Through this work I became acutely attuned to the sounds of human suffering – to breath that falters, rhythm that fragments, vocal rupture that signals overwhelm, and equally to the silence that arises when grief has nowhere to go. I learnt to mitigate suffering in young children by using my voice to make sounds in resonance with the children's distress. I found grief to be not solely a psychological state, but a somatic, relational, and spiritual process requiring form, duration, and containment if it is to be integrated rather than endured. The impact of unprocessed grief on the mental health of a human population must surely be one of our central concerns as a society.

Engaged in play therapy, I discovered that healing carried a process of harmonisation which apparently found form in sound and vibration. In essence, human harmony was in some way manifest in sound. That realisation formed in the playroom[1] birthed in me a desire to explore more deeply traditional musical expression in a society with the musical human song stream at its heart, perhaps more harmonically present than within our own society. Subsequent deep immersion into the dissonant traditional polyphonic harmonies of the Republic of Georgia, known as the 'cradle of harmony', taught me how profoundly relational music can be – through a

[1] Madge Bray, *Sexual Abuse, the Child's Voice: Poppies on the Rubbish Heap* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1997); Madge Bray, *Rob the Robin and the Bald Eagle* (Artsake, 2015); Madge Bray, *Songs in the Breastmilk*, unpublished manuscript, in preparation.

process of music-making where dissonance can be explored through deep relational listening, woven intergenerationally into the fabric of a society. A discussion with Andro Simashvili, a noted Georgian songmaster, revealed a similar truth, when he told me, 'Our music is for sweetening the soul.'[2]

Nowadays, often finding myself placed in an eldership role, I bring these strands of thought together through a deepening inquiry into Scotland's own ancient musical medicine. I approach these strands not as performance traditions nor as objects of revival, but as sound-based infrastructures for community sustainability, capable of mitigating intergenerational trauma when held with integrity and understood within their original ritual and spiritual contexts.

Traditional music as service

At the heart of this inquiry lies a conviction widely shared by tradition bearers across oral cultures: that sound is not owned, but carried. The singer or piper is not the originator of meaning, but its conduit. This ethic is articulated with particular clarity by the Scottish Traveller storyteller Stanley Robertson:

> […] there's hundreds and thousands o' ballads in the air and ye ken how they call the waves the micro waves and the radio waves all go through the air, and when you want one, you just concentrate on it and breathe it down. Take it inside you 'til it becomes part o' your living soul and then, my auntie Jeannie aye ways said 'tak it oot bonnie'. She doesnae mean tae say that you've tae be the finest singer in the world tae sing it, she meant to say, sing it with the feeling and love that's been handed down with the oral tradition.[3]

Stanley Robertson's words articulate an ethic of service rather than performance (which, in current day society can equate with celebrity and financial success), locating voice within ancestry, land, breath, and moral

[2] Madge Bray, "Polyphonic Harmonies – Vibrational Healing in the Republic of Georgia", *Caduceus* 71 (2007): 17–21.

[3] Stanley Robertson, quoted in Màiri J. McFadyen, "'Presencing' Imagined Worlds: Understanding the Maysie: A Contemporary Ethnomusicological Enquiry into the Embodied Ballad Singing Experience" (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2012), 363, http://hdl.handle.net/1842/7948.

responsibility. They also offer a precise description of embodied transmission: song is taken into the body, inhabited fully, and then released in the spirit with which it was granted. This understanding provides the ethical and spiritual ground for the argument that follows.

Conceptual bridge: Sound, connection, and coherence

Human beings are relational creatures. Connection is central to our capacity to function, to make meaning, and to remain whole. When connection is compromised – through loss, rupture, displacement, or overwhelm – internal coherence is often lost. Fragmentation follows, and with it suffering, confusion, and difficulty remaining present in daily life.

This proposal arises from the observation that sound and vibration are inherently reconnective forces. They do not rely on language or explanation, and they operate directly through the body. Sustained vibration, in particular, provides a woven bedrock that can support reintegration where connection has been strained or lost. What contemporary language names as 'coherence' was recognised in earlier Highland communities through ritual sound.

Ancient grief wisdom practices and the *conyach*

Highland Scotland once possessed a deep communal wisdom of grief: embodied, relational, and profoundly spiritual. From what we can infer from before the Reformation, lament was not an internalised or privatised emotion but a collective rite,[4] embedded within community life and ritual practice. Women were central practitioners within this ecology.

The word *'caoineadh/còineadh/cóineadh'* (variations according to region) in Scots Gaelic, from which comes 'keening' in English, is probably the same root word that give us *'conyach'* in the Scots Traveller Cant. The word is used to describe the gift of conveying emotional weight to a ballad or story, and to the pibroch lament (*cumha*). Rev James Kirkwood (1650–1709) described how keening preceded and followed the piping in a funeral procession:

[4] John Lorne Campbell, ed., *A Collection of Highland Rites and Customes* (The Folklore Society, 1975), 86–87.

> The women make a crying while the corps is carried and when they have done, the Piper plays after the corps with his great pipe. When they come to the churchyard all the women (who always go along to the Burial place) make a hideous Lamentation together and then they have their particular Mournfull Song for their other Friends that lye there.[5]

Through keening – improvised sequences of cries, prayers, incantatory vocables,[6] and melodic fragments – women were instrumental in the creation of an emotional and spiritual field in which the grief could move, intensify, and resolve. Keening was not merely expressive – it was regulatory, providing both containment and sanctioned cathartic release. It allowed grief to be voiced without overwhelming the individual or fracturing the wider community.

To describe the feminine lineage that held this function, I use the term *conyach*. The word is employed descriptively rather than prescriptively, to denote a capacity for voiced grief-holding rooted in breath, relational attunement, and emotional truthfulness. The *conyach* is not a fixed technique or repertoire, but a function: the ability to hold grief in sound so that it may move, be witnessed, and settle.

Underlying this practice was a Highland cosmology in which the human person is understood as porous to land and spirit. *Anam* signifies breath, vitality, and presence; *dùthchas* binds person, lineage, and landscape; *dualchas* binds a person to family and social heritage. Within lament, breath became intercession and voice became mediation, restoring coherence between the living and the dead, the human and the more-than-human world.

Lament, scripture, and theological resonance

This understanding of lament as communal, embodied, and spiritually necessary finds resonance within the Hebrew scriptures. In Jeremiah 9:17–20, faced with devastation, the people of Judah are instructed to:

[5] Cited in Campbell, *Highland Rites and Customes*, 86.

[6] Breandán Ó Madagáin, *Caointe agus Seancheolta Eile / Keening and Other Old Irish Musics* (Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2005), 83–86.

> Consider, and call for the mourning-women to come;
> send for the skilled women to come;
> let them quickly raise a dirge over us,
> so that our eyes may run down with tears,
> and our eyelids flow with water.[7]

Lament here is not excess or disorder, but theologically sanctioned clarity and a communal imperative. Emotion and meaning are not opposed. Rather, grief is voiced so that the community may remain coherent in the face of loss. This scriptural summons mirrors the role of keening women within pre-Reformation Scotland and challenges later Protestant discomfort with embodied sorrow and female ritual authority.

Suppression: Church authority and moral regulation

It can be argued that the Scottish Reformation of 1560 introduced a radically altered spiritual and social order. A sacramental and expressive Catholic spirituality was replaced by a theocratic Calvinist discipline that prioritised doctrinal purity, restraint, and suspicion of embodied ritual expression. Within this framework, female-led lamentation practices became increasingly suspect. Keening, with its emotional intensity and spiritual mediation, was condemned as disorderly, superstitious, or spiritually dangerous.

This suspicion intensified within the broader climate of seventeenth-century witch persecution, particularly under James VI, when women associated with healing, ritual, and vocal expression and closeness to nature were subject to heightened scrutiny and fear. Church records testify to the severity of this suppression. In 1642, the Synod of Argyll expressed its distaste for this 'hideous howl':

> Because it is common custome in some of the remotest pairts within this province of ignorant poore women to howle their dead into the graves, which commonly is called the *coronach*, a thing unseemly to be used in any true Christian kirk […] it is ordained that every minister both in preacheing and catechiseing endeavour to inform

[7] Jeremiah 9:17–18 (NRSV).

> them how unseemly to Christians, and offensive to God, and scandalouse to others the lyke practice and carriage must be.[8]

In 1666, the Synod of Armagh in Ireland threatened pipers who led funerals or played at wakes with excommunication. Both practices persisted however, and in 1689, Sir Richard Cox complained that bagpipes 'are much used at Irish Burials to increase the noise and encourage the Women to Cry and follow the Corpse.'[9]

What was being dismantled was not merely a musical custom, but a feminine ministry of grief:[10] embodied, relational, and spiritually authoritative. Though public keening was prohibited, fragments endured in remote communities and private ritual spaces. Grief, however, lost its communal container.

Continuity and displacement: Gaelic song and *pìobaireachd cumha*

Lamentation did not disappear from Highland culture. Instead, it survived through displacement into other musical forms,[11] most notably Gaelic song and the classical piping tradition of *pìobaireachd* (pibroch), which had coexisted alongside keening for some time. Gaelic song retained many of keening's melodic and affective contours:[12] rising cries, falling resolutions, and a tonal gravity shaped by loss, exile, and longing for land and kin. Many *òrain* (songs) functioned as laments even when not explicitly designated as such, carrying grief not primarily through narrative but through felt melodic shape and breath-led phrasing.

More structurally, the *pìobaireachd* lament (*cumha*) preserved the architecture of grief[13] in instrumental form. *Pìobaireachd*, traditionally performed on the Great Highland Bagpipe, encompassed several functions

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[8] Campbell, *Collection of Highland Rites and Customes*, 86–87.

[9] Sean Donnelly, "A Few Seventeenth-Century Irish Pipers", *Piping Times* 50, no. 6 (1998): 51; cited from *Hibernia Anglicana* (London, 1689), 24.

[10] Michael Newton and Hugh Cheape, "The Keening of Women and the Roar of the Pipe: From Clàrsach to Bagpipe, ca. 1600–1782", *Ars Lyrica* 17 (2008): 75.

[11] Newton and Cheape, 75–78.

[12] Ó Madagáin, *Caointe agus Seancheolta Eile.*

[13] Hugh Cheape, *Bagpipes: A National Collection of a National Instrument* (National Museums Scotland, 2008), 66–67.

(gathering tunes, salutes, and laments) but it is within the *cumha* that the deepest emotional and spiritual work of the lament tradition is encountered.

A *pìobaireachd* lament begins with a spacious *ùrlar* (ground melody), unfolds through intensifying variations – *dithis*, doublings, *taorluath*, *crunluath* – and returns to the ground. This arc mirrors the movement of grief itself: arrival, intensification, rupture, release, and return. Crucially, the form allows sorrow to rise without collapse, and to settle without denial.

Bagpipe drones create a continuous sonic field that stabilises attention and supports presence. Sustained vibration provides a woven bedrock that allows experience to move without fragmentation. Melodic structures, when held with care and continuity, can provide a safe architecture through which intensity, release, and return may safely occur. When approached with tenderness rather than force, *pìobaireachd* becomes less a display and more a carrying stream, allowing experience to move while remaining held. Alongside this, *conyach* (the use of voice as relational sounding) offers a complementary mode of accompaniment. Where the pipes provide continuity and ground, the voice responds to what is present, allowing human feeling, story, and breath to be sounded into the held field. Together, drone and voice create a balance of structure and responsiveness, steadiness and attunement.

My own view, formed by many experiences of trauma resolution in human suffering and taking into account more modern advances in our understanding of the neurobiology of the brain, suggests that each stage of a *pìobaireachd* corresponds to a natural human grief process. When played with presence and heart-resonance, the music gently guides the body and nervous system through sorrow and back into steadiness. From the perspective of grief tending, my understanding of the musical progressions in *pìobaireachd* are as follows:

– The *ùrlar* (the Ground) in *pìobaireachd* creates safety. The drones and slow pace establish a ground where grief can exist without overwhelming the listener. Played with heart resonance, it can feel still, weighted and inevitable. Its message to the psyche is: 'The grief is here, but it is not asking anything yet.'

– The next stage, *dithis*, heralds an awakening. It allows grief to begin moving. Emotion starts to stir gently, without force or drama. The predominant feeling is careful, patient and attentive. The piper escorts the grief. The grief is acknowledged. It says, 'I am here.'

– The middle variations, doublings, carry the weight and signal endurance. The piper holds sorrow steadily, without collapsing or rushing. The steadiness is what keeps the listener safe.

– The next *pìobaireachd* movement, the *taorluath*, marks the threshold and approaches the deepest part of grief. This is the edge where emotion is strong, but the musical structure still holds. The mood is intense, present and the vibration is wide. For the listener this can perhaps represent the hardest place to stay present.

– The *crunluath* is the climatic point in the musical expression of the *pìobaireachd*, where full truth is reached. This allows grief to be fully acknowledged and witnessed. The music offers clarity inside sorrow. Clear, strong and dignified. True recognition.

– What follows is a return to the ground (*ùrlar*), allowing integration. Grief can settle into the body. Quiet, changed and calm. The loss is no longer overwhelming. It has discovered a place to live in the psyche. The implicit message is: 'We are not leaving the grief – we are living with it.' In this way, the *pìobaireachd* does not remove grief; it teaches the body to carry it and return safely to earth.

(In relation to the *crunluath*, I recently received personal communication from Dr Iain MacKinnon, a scholar of Gaelic history and cosmology, based in Camuscross in Skye. Also a piper, Iain makes the following observations which serve to offer a helpful linguistic perspective on the potential historic deeper meaning and significance of the *crunluath*.

He states that *'crùn'* in contemporary Gaelic means 'crown' and that *crunluath* is sometimes referred to today as 'the crowning movement' of a *piobaireachd*. However, he tells me that two of the earliest writings on *piobaireachd*, by Joseph MacDonald of Durness (c. 1760) and by Donald MacDonald of Skye (c. 1820), who were both Gaelic speakers, use the term *'creanludh'*. Dr MacKinnon advises me that Armstrong's 1825 Gaelic dictionary defines *'crean'* as 'to smart or suffer', and that Dwelly's later dictionary from c. 1911 gives *'crean'* as a variant of *'crein'*, with meanings that include 'smart', 'suffer for', 'quake', 'tremble', and even, 'upheave, tear up, excavate'. The Gaelic word *'ludh'* is given in Dwelly as 'manner' or 'way' which suggests *'creanludh'* as 'the way of trembling' or 'the way of suffering'. Dr MacKinnon notes that in many *piobaireachd* the *creanludh* movement is followed by the *'creanludh-a-mach*' movement. *'A-mach'* is one of two related Gaelic words that mean 'out'. The related *'a-muigh'* refers to the condition of being outside of something, while *'a-*

mach' specifically refers to the movement of going outside of something. In this sense *'creanludh-a-mach'* could be considered 'the way of trembling going out' or 'the way of suffering going out', perhaps indicating a form of release. He suggests that there is 'something psychological behind the gradual elaboration and development of the melody leading into the almost explosive last development section before a final return to the calm of the original ground'. He concludes: 'When a tune contains a *creanludh-a-mach* movement, the transition back to the ground is even more striking: from explosive, almost erratic, movement, back to relative slowness, calm, and the familiarity of the ground. I think this adds to your thesis about the grief healing function of the music.')

Piping schools, masculine form, and embodied transmission

By the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, widely regarded as the zenith of the classical piping schools, *pìobaireachd* had become the most complex and demanding form of Highland instrumental music. *Pìobaireachd* was known as *Ceòl Mòr*[14] or 'Big Music', which distinguished it from *Ceòl Beag* or 'little music'. Piping schools were embedded within clan hierarchies and were overwhelmingly male-coded domains. Pipers formed part of a chief's retinue, alongside bards and *seanachies* (clan historians), and their music carried ceremonial, mnemonic, and spiritual weight.

Training within the piping schools was rigorous and extended. Apprenticeships often lasted many years, sometimes up to a decade, with pupils living in close proximity to their teachers and absorbing the repertoire through immersion rather than formal instruction. Music was transmitted orally through *canntaireachd*,[15] a sophisticated system of vocables encoding melody, rhythm, and ornamentation.

The use of *canntaireachd* required learners to internalise music through embodied memory and affective attunement rather than visual notation. This mode of learning relied on breath, sensation, and felt timing. The piper learned not only the sequence of notes, but the emotional weight and rhythmic forward movement of the music, or *siubhal*. Within this context, *pìobaireachd* lament was not conceived as performance for entertainment,

[14] Cheape, *Bagpipes*, 3.

[15] Dickson, Joshua. "Piping Sung: Women, *Canntaireachd* and the Role of the Tradition-Bearer", *Scottish Studies* 36 (2013): 1–19.

but as service: to honour the dead, to mark communal thresholds, and to hold collective emotion. *Pìobaireachd* was widely regarded within Highland society as the highest and most demanding form of traditional music, not because of virtuosity alone, but because of its capacity to carry meaning and memory.

Masculine containment, feminine flow, and balance

Although *pìobaireachd* was practised primarily by men, its expressive power depends upon what may be understood as feminine flow within masculine structure.[16] Breath-led phrasing, elasticity of time, and emotional permeability are essential to the music's capacity to hold grief. These qualities echo the function of the *conyach* within keening, transposed into instrumental form.

It is important to consider that the role of the Highland piper in the execution of *Ceòl Mòr* was to provide a service to his Chief and to his clan that encapsulated the ritual functions of his office. *Ceòl Mòr* honoured, offered salutation, prepared men to protect the safety of the clan, immortalised the dead and supported the process of soul transition. Entertainment and social interaction belonged in the *Ceòl Beag* or Little Music. The two were distinctly separate.

As *pìobaireachd* became increasingly professionalised and later militarised, particularly through competitive and notated contexts, its relational and breath-based qualities were often constrained. At the same time, the feminine vocal lineage of keening diminished under new cultural influences, including formal vocal training and performance aesthetics that prioritised control, projection, and polish over raw relational sound.

The result suggests a gradual erosion of balance. Where masculine containment dominates without feminine flow, *pìobaireachd* risks becoming rigid or abstracted. Similarly, where flow is present without containment, grief risks fragmentation. I am reminded here of the production of Harris Tweed, where the warp and the weft need to be in right relationship in order that a wearable garment can be produced. The tradition itself, therefore, points toward the necessity of balance, rather than dominance of one principle over the other.

[16] Newton and Cheape, 83.

Case study: Duncan Johnstone's "Lament for Alan, My Son"

The continuing potency of the *cumha* is vividly demonstrated in Duncan Johnstone's "Lament for Alan, My Son" (1980), composed following the death of his young son. The work is widely regarded as one of the finest *pìobaireachd* compositions of the modern era and stands alongside the great laments of the classical tradition.

The *ùrlar* is fragile and breath-like, shaped by restraint rather than display. As variations unfold, ornamentation becomes rhythmic sobbing: intensity held securely within form. Masculine containment and feminine flow meet. On the return of the ground, the melody arrives altered, clarified through sorrow. When *pìobaireachd* is played in such balance, its function extends beyond expression into memorialisation. Listeners frequently report that these laments lodge permanently in memory, experienced less as pieces of music than as enduring presences. In this way, the deceased is not only remembered but, in a sense, immortalised through sound, held within communal memory by the structure of the music itself.

Re-articulation: "Alan My Son"

In response to these encounters, I composed the following words to "Alan My Son",[17] consciously weaving keening cadence with *pìobaireachd* architecture. The repeated invocation acts as a ground, while verses move through memory and ache before returning.

> Alan my son, Alan my son,
> Aifter yer springtime, winter's come.
> Yer mither's een are greetin' sair,
> Ah will sound the pipes for ye.

Here, keening breath meets chanter tone. Feminine flow meets masculine form. Sound becomes prayer; prayer invites intervention and resolution. The song was written to be sung alongside Duncan Johnstone's *pìobaireachd* "Lament for Alan, My Son", allowing the voice to enter the sonic field created by the pipes rather than compete with it. The voice

[17] See Appendix p. 36.

responds, rather than leads. In this way, the lament returns to a dialogical form, recalling the earlier co-existence of keening and piping within communal grief ritual.

The text of the song deliberately mirrors the structural movement of the *pìobaireachd*. The opening verses establish the ground of loss, naming the rupture of time and expectation: 'Aifter yer springtime, winter's come.' Subsequent verses move through embodied memory: breath, touch, laughter, the intimate sounds of early life. These memories are not narrated for sentiment, but sounded as a form of presence, allowing the dying young person to remain relationally held.

> Alan my son, Alan my son,
> The chanter horn breathes for ye.
> An' in ilka breath, ma bonnie bairn,
> It sounds yer note abeen the air.

Here the chanter becomes an extension of breath itself. The dying breath of the child, understood within *pìobaireachd* lore to have informed the melodic motif of Johnstone's lament is not represented as an ending, but as a note carried forward, sustained within the drone. Breath is no longer only human, but cosmological. The later verses widen the field of grief beyond the individual, locating sorrow within landscape and continuity:

> Yer note noo sleeps in a' that grows
> In wind, in water, in the rose.

This reflects a Gaelic cosmology in which *anam* (soul or breath) is not extinguished but redistributed. Sound becomes a vehicle of continuity; the lost one is not erased but woven into the living world. Grief, in this articulation, does not seek resolution through forgetting, but through transformation and re-belonging. The final return to the invocation restores stillness:

> Ma chanter horn will weep for ye,
> Noo an' through eternity.

As with the return of the *ùrlar* in *pìobaireachd*, the music does not erase sorrow, but establishes a way of living with it. The lament becomes an act

of ongoing relationship rather than closure. In this way, "Alan My Son" functions not as performance, but as ritual speech: grief voiced within form, held within continuity, and offered as prayer.

Trauma, ritual, and ancestral insight

Contemporary trauma research, for example the work of Bessel van der Kolk and others, affirms what Highland tradition appears to have known intuitively. Trauma persists when instinctive discharge, vocal, physical, relational is interrupted. Breath, rhythm, and communal witnessing are now recognised as essential to integration. Keening provided precisely these elements. Its suppression, followed by the narrowing of grief ritual in modern funerary practice, has left many without a container for sorrow. Intergenerational trauma persists and emerges in our society as poverty, violence and family dysfunction, not only through what is remembered, but through what is unvoiced.

My own professional work with traumatised communities reinforced this understanding. Across cultures, grief follows a recognisable cadence – one that the body knows instinctively. It is this same cadence that I later recognised both in surviving keening practices and in the structural movement of the *pìobaireachd cumha*.

Lewis and the *Iolaire* echo

In 1974, as a young student social worker, tasked with preparing a mental health assessment, I encountered keening completely unexpectedly on the Island of Lewis in the remote Outer Hebrides. Within the spectacle, were sound cadences familiar to my own musical ear, and reminiscent of bagpipe laments. I was required to visit a mentally troubled old lady – the village nuisance. She was a compulsive hoarder whose bizarre behaviour included stealing silver foil and milk bottle tops and filling her home with them. Murdina was likely to have been born in the 1890s. Communication was difficult as she was a native Gaelic speaker with no English, who lived alone.

This lady, I later discovered, had lived through the '*Iolaire* disaster' which had befallen the islands in 1918. On the 31st December 1918, the islanders were in celebratory mood, waiting to welcome home their young men who had survived World War 1. Tragically one of the two ships

carrying the men, HMY *Iolaire*, capsized in a gale within sight of the shore with catastrophic loss of hundreds of men. Islanders were reduced to combing the beaches the next morning to drag washed up bodies from the sea.[18]

Murdina: Movements and sounds observed

Wading through a hallway of silver detritus knee deep, I had hardly entered the room when, perched on a low stool, Murdina suddenly began to wail. The visceral wailing was rhythmic: 'AAA EEE! AAA EEEE WAEEEE! MARRA AAA! MARRA HAAAA! OCH OCH!'

Repeated circular sound, interspersed with sobbing. She brought her arms above her head and mirrored the rhythmic musical wailings, waving her arms slowly up above her head and then to the floor. On occasions she knelt down hammering the ground, wailing distractedly. At other times hammering her chest. Intervention to arrest the process seemed futile – so shocked, and at a loss for words, intuitively I knelt on the floor opposite her and mirrored her sounds and body movements. In what became an interaction, the sounds and movements were shared. (At the time, trauma theory and cultural frameworks for such expression were unavailable within professional training.) This spontaneous mirroring action appeared to evolve a form of co-regulation, as after the outpouring of wailing was spent, Murdina approached, with a tear-stained face, for the comfort of an embrace. On all eight visits a similar ritual occurred.

It is apparent to me now, with the benefit of hindsight, that what I was witnessing was a living remnant of a communal grief practice – an unbroken thread, carried privately, when public expression was perhaps forbidden.

Jeannie Robertson and the *conyach* in song

Jeannie Robertson, the Traveller singer, is widely acknowledged as one of the finest tradition bearers of the Scottish song tradition. Her voice carried the *conyach*: an embodied moral authority and a clarity of timbre that allowed grief both catharsis and containment. In her singing, sorrow was

[18] See Malcolm Macdonald and Donald John MacLeod, *The Darkest Dawn: The Story of the Iolaire Tragedy* (Acair, 2018).

permitted to move fully without fragmentation. I once heard her sing "MacCrimmon's Lament", and that rendition has remained with me ever since. What I heard in her voice was the same grief-holding capacity that I encounter when *pìobaireachd* is played in true balance – where masculine structure and feminine flow are held together. In that moment, the distinction between keening and *pìobaireachd* fell away; both enacted the same ancient function of escorting grief through sound in the interests of communal grief tending.

Restoration: Heart resonance and the mending nest

Restoring lament is theological as well as communal work. When containment and flow align, the heart becomes coherent: breath deepens, presence expands, sorrow moves. This is heart resonance. The Mending Nest Project seeks to recover this lineage by reuniting song, breath, land, and community. It serves as a remembrance: a return to sound as service, grounded in tradition and responsive to contemporary need.

Conclusion

From keening women to *pìobaireachd cumha*, from suppression to survival, Scottish lament reveals a fundamental truth: grief must be given voice to be healed. Though a feminine ministry of lament was silenced, its resonance endures in song, in *pìobaireachd*, in land, and in memory. Reclaiming lament restores ancestral wisdom and reconnects us with the coherence of the heart. In some parts of Scotland, we still live in the shadow of bygone Protestant teachings that afforded little opportunity for the shared emotional expression of grief. There is, however, the old expression: 'a good funeral'. Is it possible that we have reached a point where, in the spirit of our own ancestral music tradition, we too might more comfortably recall the shortest verse in the Bible, John 11:35 – 'Jesus wept.'?

Acknowledgement

I wish to acknowledge the generous guidance and companionship of Allan MacDonald, whose life's work has been devoted to recovering the heart of the *pìobaireachd* lament and restoring its rightful place as a vessel of communal memory, spiritual intelligence, and emotional truth. Against considerable resistance he has held to the integrity of that lineage with courage, clarity, and unwavering conviction. His profound understanding of *pìobaireachd* lament and Gaelic song motifs, handed to me with great patience and generosity, opened a doorway into the music's inner architecture that I could not have accessed alone. Through his scholarship, his playing, and the fidelity with which he has carried these traditions, he has reconnected me with my own ancestral thread. I am profoundly grateful for his insight, mentorship, and friendship, and I owe him more than words can say.

Appendix

Alan My Son: A Lament for Voice and Pipes

1. Alan my son, Alan my son,
   Aifter yer springtime, winter's come.
   Yer mither's een are greetin' sair,
   Ah will sound the pipes for ye.

2. Alan my son, Alan my son,
   The chanter horn breathes for ye.
   An' in ilka breath, ma bonnie bairn,
   It sounds yer note abeen the air.

3. The bairnies' wail that rent the nicht,
   The hour ye first beheld the licht.
   Yon chucklin' laugh, sae sweet, sae free,
   When smilin' hands were ticklin' ye.

4. Ower hill an' glen there sounds the note
   That's breathin' frae the chanter's throat.
   Ma sobbin' fingers dirlin' sair,
   For ye that canna bide nae mair.

5. Yer note noo sleeps in a' that grows,
   In wind, in water, in the rose.
   An' a' the heartbreak lived can be
   A sound fur a' eternity.

6. Alan my son, Alan my son,
   Aifter yer springtime, winter's come.
   Ma chanter horn will weep for ye,
   Noo an' through eternity.