

III.—THE ORIGINS OF THE NORTHUMBRIAN PIPES.

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[Read on 25th February, 1931.]

This paper was written with the intention of filling up certain *lacunæ* in the published accounts of the Northumbrian pipes. Books on the bag-pipe are, naturally, few, and are in almost every case written from a distinctly national point of view, as witness that by Dr. Grattan Flood, in which Irish origins are unduly stressed, and Dr. Duncan Fraser's *Reminiscences*, which has an equally strong Scottish bias. In such books the pipes of Northumberland are usually dismissed in a cursory manner with the remark that although bag-pipes were once popular in England they have now died out except in the extreme north, where a few players of a debased form of the instrument may still be found. Until the last few years, comparatively little has been written by Northumbrians on the subject of the pipes of their county, and the published papers are regrettably short and lacking in detail. Even the Ancient Melodies committee of this society, when compiling their book of Northumbrian airs, did not greatly concern themselves with the history of the pipes on which these airs were played. It was sufficient for them that the pipes existed, and it has been left to later enthusiasts to go more deeply into the strictly historical aspect.

In *Archæologia Aeliana* for 1930, volume VII of the fourth series, Mr. George Charlton demonstrates that the bag-pipe is an instrument of respectable antiquity, and

that it has been known in this country for some centuries. He also deals with the more recent developments of the Northumbrian pipes themselves, but has not touched upon the particular ancestry of the latter, his article being more in the nature of a general survey. It is the purpose of the present writer to deal with the sources from which the Northumbrian bag-pipes are apparently derived, and to consider the influences which have determined the present complicated form of the instrument in question.

The old English mouth-blown bag-pipe, which was of simple form, either droneless or having only one or two drones, was in use until the middle of the eighteenth century, as is shown by its appearing in some of the paintings of Hogarth: the *Southwark Fair* (1733) and *Election Entertainment* (1755) may be quoted as examples. By this date, however, the small-pipe was a completely developed instrument, as there is in the collection of Mr. W. A. Cocks a set which he dates *circa* 1700; it is clear, then, that the small-pipe has no direct connection with the old English pattern. If the latter had not died out, it would have most likely developed on similar lines to the Highland, and become a military instrument, retaining simplicity and robustness of construction whilst gaining in tone and power.

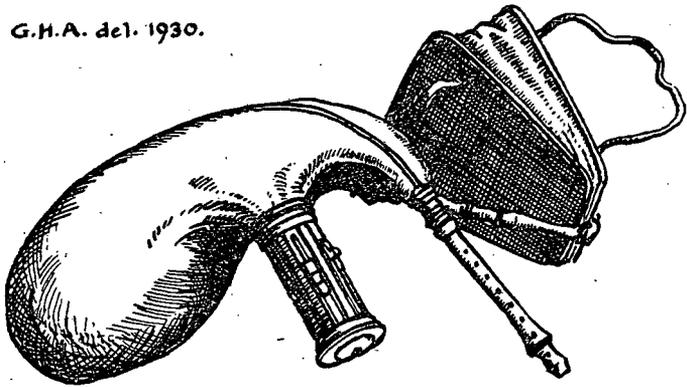
For the origins of the bellows-blown pipes, however, it is necessary to look further back, and perhaps it would be best at this point to set out the four peculiarities of construction which differentiate the Northumbrian small-pipes from the older pattern. They are as follows:

- (a) The wind is supplied by a bellows and not from the lungs of the player.
- (b) The drones are all fixed in one stock.
- (c) The method of fingering is that known as "close," i.e. only one hole of the chanter must be open at one time.
- (d) The chanter is closed at the bottom end, and in more recent instruments is fitted with keys to increase the range.

These four points will be dealt with in the order quoted, in so far as it is possible to treat them separately.

It is not known at what date, or by whom, the bellows were first adapted to the blowing of a bag-pipe, but the idea was obviously suggested by the portative organ. The *Musica getutscht* of Sebastian Virdung, published at Basle in 1511 and the oldest printed work on musical instruments, mentions only the mouth-blown bag-pipe or *cornemuse à bouche*. In Praetorius' *Syntagma musicum*, published in 1618, the earliest known illustration of a

G.H.A. del. 1930.



EARLY FORM OF THE MUSETTE,
AFTER PRAETORIUS, 1618.

FIG. 1.

bellows-blown bag-pipe is given, and the text states the instrument to be of French origin. The bag-pipe portrayed is of the type later called the *musette* (fig. 1), and as this will have to be referred to again, a brief description will not be out of place. The woodcut in question shows a small bag-pipe with a plain chanter and a set of shuttle or barrel drones, and having its bellows attached. These drones are the outstanding and typical feature of the musette, and are not easy to describe. Dr. Grattan Flood, quoting an earlier writer, says that

the drones of the musette "are all fitted into one cylinder, being brought into small space by the doubling of the tubes within this cylinder, which is provided with sliding stops for tuning the drones." The latter are, in fact, holes bored through a cylindrical block of wood, and the necessary length obtained by fitting end pieces containing U-shaped holes to connect the borings. These finally emerge at one or other end of the barrel into troughs cut lengthwise in the outside of the cylinder, and partly covered in, the open portions being increased or decreased by moving the sliding stops or *shuttles* to and from, thus shortening or lengthening the vibrating columns of air.

The fact that this complicated form of bag-pipe could be illustrated in a book as early as 1618 is sufficient evidence that it had been known for some years. C. E. Borjon, in his *Traité de la Musette*, published in 1672, says that the bellows had then been in use for some forty or fifty years; but he does not seem to be very sure on this point, and it is likely that the date he suggests is not sufficiently early. On the other hand, Dr. Fraser suggests in his *Reminiscences* that one Colin Muset, whom he cites as a noted French piper of the thirteenth century and who was given a post at court, may "have been the first inventor of the bellows-pipe." I have not been able to trace Dr. Fraser's authority for this statement, but find it difficult to believe in view of the fact that the very few thirteenth century representations of bag-pipes that remain to us show a crude form of the instrument, usually without drones of any kind. Possibly Dr. Fraser may have attempted to show some connection between *Muset* and *musette*, but on consulting Thomas Busby's *Complete Dictionary of Music* one finds that the word *musette* is associated with what is apparently a stem-word *muse* meaning "the muzzle or tube of the bag-pipe." The *musette*, therefore, would be the pipe with the small muzzle, as distinct from the larger mouth-blown pipe with its bell-ended chanter of conical bore.

The evidence seems to show that the bellows-blown

bag-pipe was first invented about the middle of the sixteenth century or perhaps slightly earlier, but it is unsafe to adduce any definite date for its introduction into this country. There are, however, certain references to the Irish uilleann or bellows-blown bag-pipe which may throw some light on this point. Shakespeare, in *The Merchant of Venice*, act iv, scene 1, refers to a "woollen bag-pipe," and the word "woollen" is near enough to the pronunciation of "uilleann" to leave little doubt as to the meaning, although Dr. John Leyden, in his Dissertation on Wedderburn's *Complaynt of Scotland*, suggests that the woollen cover of the bag may be the source of the term. This attribution is very doubtful, however, as such covers must rarely have been of any other than woollen material. In Ledwich's *Antiquities of Ireland* it is stated that at the close of the sixteenth century considerable improvements were made in the Irish bag-pipe by taking the pipe from the mouth and causing the bag to be filled by a small pair of bellows on compression from the elbow: Dr. Grattan Flood also states that the uilleann pipes were invented about 1588. It is quite reasonable, therefore, that Shakespeare should refer to them in 1594, but although this may be taken to show that the bellows-blown pipe was known in England then, it gives no clue to the date of its introduction to this country. An interesting point is raised by the fact that Henry VIII possessed certain bag-pipes with pipes of ivory, the bag of one set being covered with purple velvet. These are mentioned in an inventory of the musical instruments in St. James's palace in the first year of king Edward VI, the authority being Harleian MS. 1419. "Pipes of ivory" suggest an instrument of small size, and a velvet bag is rarely found on any other bag-pipe than the bellows-blown variety, but as there is no mention of bellows with the pipes we cannot treat them as early evidence of the musette in England. It would have been pleasant to think that Henry VIII, an accomplished musician, was the means of introducing the musette to this country, perhaps upon his return from the Field of

THE ORIGINS OF THE NORTHUMBRIAN PIPES



the Cloth of Gold, but this must remain an agreeable fancy.

The first actual evidence for the English bellows-blown bag-pipe with the musette type of drones is a set which at one time belonged to the late J. Campbell Noble, R.S.A., and which is doubtless still in the possession of his heirs. It was described and illustrated in the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle Supplement* of January 27, 1894, and bore the following inscriptions :

"The gift of Simon Robertson to
Salathiel Humphries, 1695."

"He died January 16th, 1722."

This set of pipes has the barrel type of drones, with six shuttles, and a plain open chanter very like the old small-pipe pattern. A similar set, in the collection of Mr. William Cocks, is illustrated in plate VII, fig. 1, but the chanter in this case is not original. The resemblance to the musette is so striking that there can be no doubt as to the ancestry of this form of bag-pipe. The chanter is, it is true, plain and key-less, but so were those of the early musettes, the keys being added at a later date.

It must soon have been found that the shuttle drones, which were difficult to construct and required a large quantity of wind, were not so efficient as those of the Lowland type, i.e., straight jointed tubes fitted with single beating reeds instead of the double reeds demanded by the long convoluted drones of the musette. Thus we find the oldest examples of the true small-pipes, as distinct from the miniature Lowland pipes to be mentioned later, in 1700 or thereabouts. Such early specimens have but three drones with open ends; stops were not fitted to the drones until the time of the introduction of the keyed chanter, when four drones began to be the usual number provided. Sometimes five or even six drones may be found in a completely developed set of small-pipes, but it is usual to employ only three at a time, and stops are required to shut off the others.

Having arrived at the subject of drones, it will now be

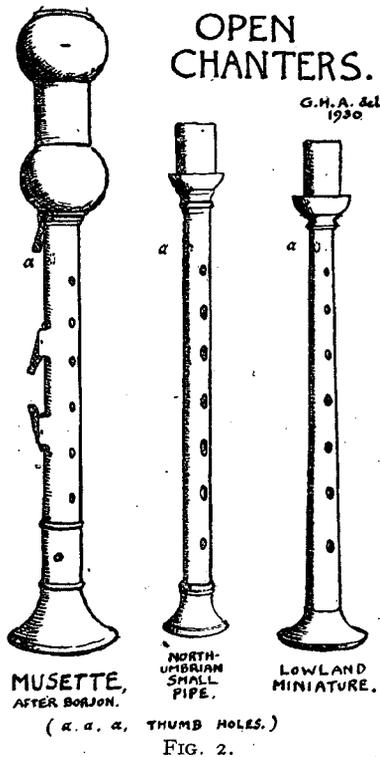
proper to discuss the method of mounting them, which is the second point of difference between the small-pipes and the old English bag-pipe. The latter had but one or two drones, and these are always shown as being separately inserted into the bag, although sometimes very close together; but in the small-pipes the drones are all carried in the same mount or *stock*. This system of mounting is found in the pipes of other countries: it was a characteristic of certain types of German bag-pipe which appear to be extinct, and is still to be seen in the uilleann pipes of Ireland (plate VIIA, fig. 1), and the *zampogna* of Italy. (It is also, of course, found in the Lowland and the larger Northumbrian pipes, of which mention will be made later.) The earliest example of its use, however, seems to be the illustration of the Irish war-pipes given in Derrick's *Image of Ireland*, 1578 (plate VIIA, fig. 2), where the two drones of the war-pipe, although partly concealed by the player's head, seem to share a common stock. The French, Hungarian and Spanish mouth-blown pipes sometimes have more than one drone, but these are always separately mounted, and in the French cornemuse one drone is usually carried in the same stock, and parallel with the chanter, a most inconvenient position, one would think, as it seems likely to interfere with the player's hand.

It seems highly probable that the drone mounting of our local pipes comes to us from Ireland by way of that of the Lowland pattern, but it does not seem to have done so until the use of the bellows had become familiar through the *shuttle-pipes*, as the small-pipes with musette type of drones are sometimes called.

The third peculiarity of the small-pipes consists of the method of fingering the chanter. In the Scottish pipes several finger holes of the chanter may be uncovered at once, as also in the Irish uilleann pipes, but with the Northumbrian small-pipes it is far otherwise. Only one hole must be open at one time, whether normally covered by finger or key, except when it is desired to make a trill on any particular note. No other form of bag-pipe now

in use appears to have this system of fingering, but it is almost identical with that laid down for the musette by C. E. Borjon, in his *Traité de la Musette*, in 1672. This work, which is now very rare, is well worthy of study by all interested in the small-pipes. With a very few alterations, the instructional portion of it would serve as a tutor for our own pipes, and the directions for the general care of the instrument are interesting and useful.

According to Borjon, the scale given by the finger holes of the musette chanter (see fig. 2) is the scale or octave of G and the leading note below; some specimens have two, three or more keys for the provision of sharps or flats and to extend the compass above the upper G. The would-be player is told to place the thumb and three adjacent fingers of the upper hand on the four uppermost holes of the chanter, the thumb hole being at the back: the first, second and third fingers of the lower hand cover the next three holes, and the little finger of the lower hand must remain "in the air" until such time as it is necessary to sound the lowest note of the chanter. Thus the note given by the chanter with the fingers in these positions would be low G. In playing, the fingers must not be raised high, and only one lifted at a time, except when a trill is required to be made on any note. The pupil is told to finger as neatly as possible, so that the closing of one hole is simultaneous



with the fingers in these positions would be low G. In playing, the fingers must not be raised high, and only one lifted at a time, except when a trill is required to be made on any note. The pupil is told to finger as neatly as possible, so that the closing of one hole is simultaneous

with the opening of the next. If any fault in fingering be made by a pause between the two movements, the wrong note so produced will be low G, which will be in concord with the drones; and this is obviously the reason for keeping the little finger of the lower hand off the lowest finger hole. When it is necessary to use one of the keys of the chanter, an otherwise unemployed digit must do it, with the exception of the key above the thumb hole, which is opened by the thumb. In pressing this key the thumb again closes the upper G hole, indeed may not have had to leave it, and any slight false note sounded in the course of the action will be the upper G, which will also be in concord with the drones and so be as unnoticeable as possible. Experiments carried out with a set of ordinary small-pipes, with the low F key propped open and the lower little finger kept away from the G hole, have shown that it is possible to play simple small-pipe tunes on the system of fingering laid down by Borjon, and there is no doubt that with a chanter made to be so played the effect would be almost the same as that given by the small-pipes. It is true that one loses the staccato effect obtainable with the closed chanter, but this same staccato is liable to misuse: good small-pipe technique demands that the progression from one note to the next should be crisp and neat, but there should be no excessive cutting of the notes.

Borjon's work is mentioned by various writers in dealing with the bag-pipe, but it is doubtful whether he has been read extensively by any author familiar with the Northumbrian small-pipe fingering; otherwise the similarity between the two styles would most likely have been noticed earlier. As has been mentioned above, the book is well worthy of study: Borjon warns his readers against making grimaces, holding the breath, and bodily antics when playing; and these faults may still be seen amongst small-pipe players, not only beginners. He also cautions musette players to be careful of their reeds, saying that "*on ne trouve pas les anches à acheter par paquets comme des cordes*": good small-pipe reeds are

also difficult to obtain, and when obtained are usually treasured.

Borjon calls his system of fingering "jouer à couvert" as distinct from the "jouer à découvert" method of playing the cornemuse or mouth-blown pipe of the period, and there can be little doubt but that in it may be seen the direct ancestor of the small-pipe fingering. The method would be absolutely suited to the old open chanter of either small or shuttle-pipes, and requires very little modification after the chanter was closed. It has always been thought that the closing of the chanter might have made a considerable change in the traditional method of fingering, but I have endeavoured to show that such would not be the case.

This brings us naturally to the fourth point of difference, the closed and keyed chanters, but these, although a comparatively recent improvement, cannot be dated with any certainty. In the period 1800-10 the first keyed chanters were being made, but there are no records to show for how long the closed chanter had then been in use. It is, of course, reasonable to suppose that the change from one to the other was made gradually, and there may still have been sets fitted with open chanters in use at a late date. All that can be said is that the closed chanter was invented during the eighteenth century, but as mentioned above, the traditional method of fingering would not be materially altered. The closing of the chanter may have been suggested by that of the Irish uilleann pipes, which can be temporarily stopped at the lower end, at the will of the player and by being pressed down on the knee, for the purpose of producing staccato notes. As for the addition of keys to the chanter, this is a natural development of any wood-wind instrument, but it is significant that the uilleann pipes were sometimes provided with keyed chanters at least as early as 1770.

Thus far only the small-pipes of Northumberland have been dealt with, and I should now like to deal briefly with the large pipes of Northumberland and the Lowlands of

Scotland. These have a similar chanter to the Highland, slightly smaller but identical in scale and compass, three drones in one stock, and are bellows blown. Some examples have the drones mounted to lie over the player's shoulder, in a position suitable for standing or marching, but the earlier sets have the drones so fitted into the bag as to be only practicable when the player is seated. The similarity to the drone mounting of the Irish uilleann pipes is remarkable, and it seems likely that this is another instance of Irish influence. Dr. Grattan Flood states that the use of the bellows was adopted in the Lowlands in the last years of king James VI before he ascended the throne of England, and he quotes Dr. Leyden in support of this opinion.

This pattern of bag-pipe was in use on both sides of the border until within fairly recent times, although it is doubtful whether there were many sets being played after the middle of the nineteenth century. The half-long pipes of Northumberland, which a few years ago were revived through the efforts of Mr. George Charlton and a small band of enthusiasts, are a variant of the Lowland pipes, but whereas the drone harmony of the latter is the same as that of the Highland pattern, i.e., two tenor drones in unison with the low A of the chanter and a bass drone an octave below, the half-long pipes have three drones of uneven length giving the two notes mentioned above and the dominant E between them. This drone harmony, although a pleasant accompaniment to airs played in the key of A, precludes any use of the key of D such as is possible on the Highland and Lowland pipes, and is consequently a restriction on the repertoire of the piper.

Mention must now be made of the miniature Lowland pipes, which are a smaller replica of the Lowland pipes proper (plate VII, fig. 2): they have the same characteristics, i.e., bellows-blowing, three drones in one stock, and plain chanter of nine notes, but resemble in appearance the Northumbrian small-pipes. Sometimes the drone harmony is the same as in the early small-pipes, and sometimes the

drones are tuned as in the larger Lowland pipes. This type of bag-pipe is frequently confused with the small-pipe of Northumberland, and it is difficult to say which was the first to be introduced: possibly the small-pipes got their drone system from the miniature Lowland type, but on the other hand the latter may have been inspired by the early small-pipes, the latter alternative being the more likely to be correct. Although of different ancestry, the similarity between the two patterns is very great; but the miniature Lowland pipes can usually be recognized by the patterns of the turning and the design of the chanter, the latter being a smaller copy of the larger Lowland chanter, and like it tapering from sole to head, although with a parallel bore (fig. 2). The true small-pipe chanter is parallel both in bore and in outward design, like the musette chanter from which it is derived: but it is impossible to lay down a hard and fast rule for identification. Even the scale given by the miniature Lowland chanter cannot be cited as evidence one way or the other, as by the use of different reeds it can be made to produce either the scale of G or A. Both types of Lowland pipes are illustrated in *The Book of the Club of True Highlanders* by C. N. McIntyre North, 1881.

Apparently some of the early sets of Lowland pipes were fitted with a chanter similar to that of the uilleann pipes of Ireland, as Joseph Macdonald, in his *Compleat Theory of the Scots Highland Bag-pipe*, compiled in 1760-3, writes: "In the Low Countries, where they use bellows to their pipes, having no music in the style of this instrument, they have enlarged the compass of it by adding pinching notes, for the better imitation of other music." The expression "pinching notes" means that by a harder pressure on the bag the chanter may be made to sound any desired note an octave higher. This is part of the technique of the uilleann pipes, but to be capable of this flexibility the chanter has to be specially designed, and such a thing could not be done with the ordinary Lowland chanter, where too much pressure would merely

make the reed squeal or stop altogether. It would seem, therefore, that when the drone-mounting and bellows-blowing were imported from Ireland to the Lowlands, some attempt was made at copying the chanter used with them in the parent country, but the attempt was not attended by much success. In George Morland's painting of *Dancing Dogs*, a set of pipes is shown which might, from their appearance, belong to this "transitional" type. They resemble a Lowland set in everything but the chanter, which is Irish in appearance: it has the almost parallel shape and small sole of the uilleann chanter, but is shorter, and the player does not appear to have to stretch his fingers very far apart. Certain chanters of apparently Irish make, but fitted with an extra continuation piece at the foot, may have been made for this type of bag-pipe, as they are disclaimed as true Irish chanters by certain authorities, and the vent-holes in the continuation piece would certainly prevent the "tipping" on the player's knee whereby staccato effects are obtained on the uilleann pipes.

Macdonald, by the way, had the poorest opinion of the "Low Country pipe," but it is obvious from his remarks that he cannot have been referring to the ordinary Lowland pipe as we know it. Sir John Graham Dalyell, in his *Musical Memoirs of Scotland*, says that the Lowland bag-pipe is unsuitable for pibroch playing, but he seems to have no other authority than Macdonald's book for this statement, as he cites it in a footnote as his source of information. That form of pipe-music known as "piobaireachd" or "pibroch" can as well be played, however, on the Lowland or Northumbrian large pipes as on the Highland, as the scale of the chanter is the same in all three cases.

Dr. Grattan Flood says that "it may be taken for granted that the only difference between the Lowland and Northumbrian pipes is one of size, the Northumbrian being the smaller"; but as there are both large and small Lowland pipes and two sizes of Northumbrian pipes as

well as the shuttle-pipe, if the latter may be considered as Northumbrian, it is obvious that Dr. Flood's statement is made without full knowledge of the facts.

One other type of bag-pipe remains to be dealt with, namely, the mouth-blown form of small-pipe. Specimens of this instrument are rare, and little is known as to their origin. Although provided with drones and a small chanter like the miniature Lowland pipes, the bag is not filled by means of a bellows, but from the player's lungs through a blowpipe of Highland pattern. This pattern of bag-pipe is included in this paper because one set at least has been labelled Northumbrian in an important museum : it is, however, really Scottish, and when the matter was mentioned to the authorities of the museum in question it was promised that the labelling would be corrected. No book on the bag-pipe appears to mention these pipes, but as they are so uncommon an author who had only seen one such set would perhaps be justified in treating it as a freak and leaving it alone. Three examples are known to the writer, the most interesting of which is the property of a well-known Tyneside piper, and bears the following inscription :

" 1st Highland Batt'n., Jan. 4 1757.
Hon. Coll. Montgomery."

This inscription doubtless refers to Major the Hon. Archibald Montgomerie, afterwards the Earl of Eglinton, who in 1757 raised the 77th Regiment (Montgomery's Highlanders), his commission as colonel being dated January 4, 1757 : the regiment was disbanded in 1763.

It has been suggested that these little pipes came into use in the Highlands after the rebellion of 1745, when the playing of the bag-pipe was forbidden under heavy penalties : by means of these quiet-sounding instruments pipers would be able to practise their art without informing the whole neighbourhood. The idea is reasonable, but it would be idle to make any definite statement on the point when the evidence is so uncertain. The set

illustrated in plate VII, fig. 3, is slightly larger than that dealt with above, and is in the collection of Mr. William Cocks.

The history of the bellows-blown bag-pipe in England may therefore be summarized as follows: invented on the continent in the early part of the sixteenth century, the musette was probably introduced into England in the latter part of that century, and remained in use, in the form known as the shuttle-pipe, until at least the end of the seventeenth century, but never achieved any great popularity. During this period the bellows had been adapted to the Irish pipes and thence to the pipes of the Scottish border, which, perhaps in their miniature form, influenced the drone system of the Northumbrian small-pipes; but the latter retained the method of fingering introduced with the musette. The present keyed pattern of small-pipe chanter, as Mr. George Charlton points out, only dates from the first years of the nineteenth century, but the fingering is substantially the same. The large or half-long pipes of Northumberland are, except for one drone being differently tuned, identical with the larger Lowland pipes. The "great Northumbrian raising or gathering pipes," which are referred to by earlier writers, but of which no definite relics remain, are doubtless the same pipes under a more impressive name.

In conclusion, I should like to make every grateful acknowledgment to Mr. William Cocks for his criticism of this paper, as well as for the generous way in which he has placed his collection of pipes, pipe-music, and books relating thereto, at my constant disposal. I have also to acknowledge the very kind help given by Mr. F. G. Rendall, of the British Museum; by Mr. J. Graham Callander, Director of the National Museum of Antiquities, Edinburgh; by Mr. W. Howard Head, and by the authorities of the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh, and the National Conservatoire of Music, Paris.



FIG. 1.

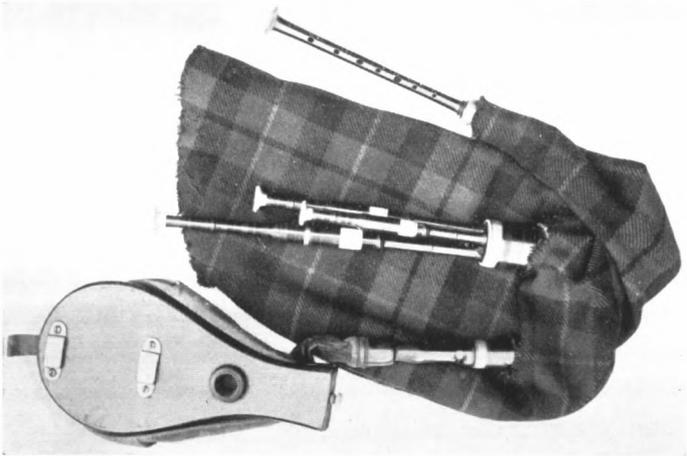


FIG. 2.



FIG. 3.

EXAMPLES OF BAG-PIPES.

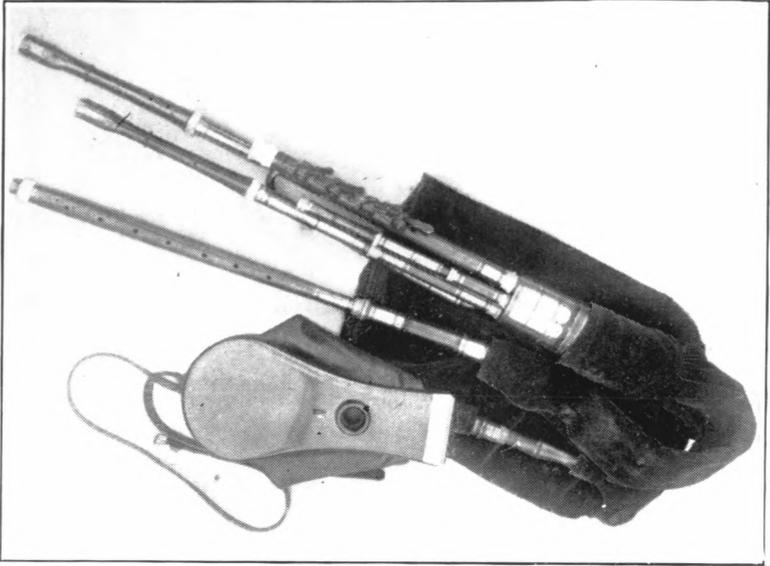


FIG. 1.



FIG. 2.

IRISH PIPES AND PIPERS.

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