

THE LEGACY OF IRISH BAGPIPING

The Irish bagpiping tradition has played a seminal role in the development of the playing styles of all other melodic instruments used in traditional Irish music today, especially in the areas of articulation and ornamentation. Being wind instruments, the flute and the tin whistle bear a more direct relationship to the pipes than do the string or free reed instruments. By gaining some knowledge of the nature, history, and evolution of piping in Ireland, you will gain crucial insight into the aesthetics of traditional Irish flute and tin whistle playing.

The modern Irish pipes are referred to as the *uilleann pipes*, the *union pipes*, or simply the *Irish pipes*. *Uilleann*, apparently a form of an old Irish word for “elbow,” makes reference to the right arm’s pumping of a bellows which fills a bag, held under the left arm, which in turn provides a continuous supply of air to the instrument. The melody pipe is called the *chanter*. Three *drone* pipes supply a constant accompaniment by sounding a note that is in unison with the low note of the chanter, usually D, as well as notes one octave and two octaves below this pitch. The *regulators* are specialized, keyed chanters that make possible the occasional additions of one, two, or three harmony notes to the melody and drones. The keys of the regulators are usually played with the heel or wrist of the lower hand.



Figure 1-16. Declan Masterson playing the uilleann pipes at the 1991 Willie Clancy Summer School, Milltown Malbay, Co. Clare. The seated listener is Drew Hillman.

The origin of the name *union pipes* is not known. “Union” may refer to the joining of the regulator pipes to the chanter and drones, or it may be a corruption of *uilleann*.^{xiv}

According to *Na Ptobairí Uilleann*, an association of uilleann pipers based in Ireland,

The history of piping in Ireland extends over a span of thirteen centuries. The earliest references are in the ancient law tracts and annals. Some high crosses have carved depictions of early pipes (10th century) and from the 15th century onwards references become more frequent. All of these pipes were mouth-blown instruments.

The distinctively Irish form of bagpipe, the union or uilleann pipes, is believed to have originated about the beginning of the 18th century. . . The present form, with three drones and three regulators, came into being at the beginning of the 19th century.

Piping was at its height in pre-famine Ireland (pre-1847) and was not confined to any social stratum. Social changes in the second half of the 19th century led to the decline in piping and by the beginning of the 20th century the last of the old pipers were mostly destitute, finding refuge in workhouses.^{xv}

THE PASTORAL BAGPIPE

The history of the uilleann pipes is a developing field of study. At the time of this writing, research indicates that the uilleann pipes’ closest ancestor was probably the *pastoral bagpipe*. Brian E. McCandless, in his article *The Pastoral Bagpipe*,^{xvi}, writes: