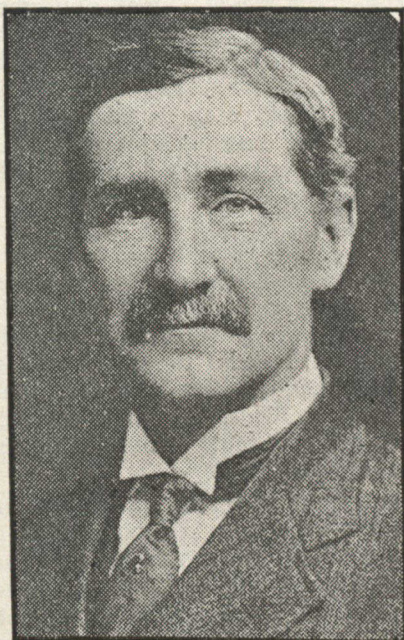


The Skirl o' the Pipes

By R. W. Douglas



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It has been asserted that the "dulcimer" of Daniel 3, was really the bagpipe, and, although that statement has not been satisfactorily proven, yet it is curious that the original word "sompnaya" is very like the name "sompagna," by which the bagpipe was known in Italy during the middle ages. It is certainly true that a drone-pipe with reed complete was found in an Egyptian mummy case. The Romans had pipes and introduced them into Southern Britain, whence they spread into Caledonia and Ireland, and survived there after they had died out in England.

In listening to a Highland pipe it will be observed that the notes of the chanter do not correspond with those of the diatonic scale, and are not strictly in tune. The same note cannot be repeated without the interpolation of grace notes, known as warblers; these, introduced to overcome a difficulty, form one of the supreme beauties in pipe music, "brilliance in his warblers" being one of the chief charms of a skilful player.

For generations the bagpipe has been the national instrument of the Highlands, and, as the Highlanders have long been a military people, it is natural enough that their national instrument should be a military one, too. It has been endeared to them on a hundred battlefields; they will follow it to perdition!

The Gordons at Dargai, the Highland regiments in Africa, in France and Belgium, in Macedonia, in Palestine, have shown their devotion. It was only recently that an officer of the Canadian Scottish—one of the regiments with pipes in its ranks—related the details of an attack through barbed wire where success came mainly through the marvellous effect of the pipe music on the men. "It was a wonderful thing," he said, "to hear those pipers playing away while the attacking party were cutting the wire, and it had a wonderful effect on them. The skirl of the pipes continued until the men got through. Then the pipers went forward with the men. The last seen of one of them, he was walking strongly towards the German trench, playing his pipes."

What other instrument can equal the bagpipe in the roar of battle? High over the din of the machine guns and rifles and the bursting shrapnel, the wild and unearthly skirl of the pipes rises like the sounds of a tempest on a rock-bound shore. Every nerve is responsive to this marvellous call. In very truth the pipes have a grand and noble sound that they share with no other musical instrument; by comparison the brass band is tame. It is on the battlefield, in wide and wild nature, the deep glen, the mountain, where the pipes may be admired and revered, where they are to be heard as they ought to be heard. And if they inspire the souls of men in combat, they soothe into infinite sadness the burial rite. Imagine the slanting rays of the evening sun gleaming on Ben Nevis, the wide and wild landscape around has become grey, and every sound seems to be sunk in the repose of night. Shortly is heard, faint and far distant, the melancholy wailing of the dirge that accompanies a funeral, as its slow procession is seen slowly marching down the hill, the tartans just visible on its brown declivity. As it advances the sounds seem to swell on the breeze till it reaches the lonely spot where a few grey stones, dispersed among the brown