

THE CAMERON STYLE

by Jay Close

PART ONE, an Introduction:

The term “Cameron style” is a convenient label for an approach to *ceol mor* linked to the famous Cameron family of pipers. This linkage comes in several forms: by self identification; reputation; oral history; folklore; and a string of teacher-student relationships that date to the first half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the Cameron family’s musical ascendancy lasted the better part of one hundred years.

This ascendancy started with two brothers, Donald and Alexander Cameron. Donald was born in 1810 and his brother in 1824. Donald’s three piper sons, Colin, Alexander (the younger) and Keith, extended that influence through the last of the 19th century and into the 20th century. The family line of pipers ended in 1923 with the death of Alexander.

During their lives, the Cameron brothers of both generations were major prize winners and the younger three contributed to all of the significant post - Angus MacKay collections of *piobaireachd*: Ross, Thomason, Glen and, indirectly, to the Piobairechd Society collections. For that reason alone, the family’s legacy would be a worthy study.

The earliest recorded reference to the Cameron family having a distinct perspective comes from General Thomason’s book *Ceol Mor* (circa 1890). Recounting the pains he has taken to insure the authenticity of his settings, the General writes,

*With a view to having the most authoritative revision possible, I have had tracings made of the whole of the first volume to send home to D. MacKay, in order that he may get them revised by the best authorities known to him, foremost among whom will certainly be Colin Cameron, late Piper to the Duke of Fife, so that the book will be fairly representative of **the school of Donald Cameron**, in which I was educated [my emphasis]. (Thomason 1975, page vii)*

Using his *piobaireachd* shorthand, Thomason claimed a facility noting *ceol mor* directly from the playing of a piper (page iii), perhaps the way a stenographer takes dictation. Keith Cameron was the General’s primary *ceol mor* mentor while stationed in India and several tunes in his book are credited to Keith’s editorial efforts. So, in addition to Thomason’s manuscript work, his book may contain a least a few arrangements of tunes that accurately reflect Keith Cameron’s music as he truly played. Additionally, one of the Cameron brothers, Colin (the eldest), wrote a manuscript of music, but it is by no means

clear whether this manuscript was a mere memory aid or a literal record of how he played.

The fact remains that we will never know how all the younger Cameron brothers played, much less how their father, Donald Cameron, or uncle Alexander played. There is evidence they differed amongst themselves (cf. Thomason pages vi-vii and Campbell 1985, page 20). Perhaps the most we can assume is a family resemblance among a related group of musicians, not a monolithic “house style”.

Into this family mix must be inserted John MacDougall Gillies, one of the most influential pipers of the latter 19th century and the the first quarter of the the 20th century. Oral history recounted by Archibald Campbell (1984, page 7, also Andrew MacNeill, personal correspondence) has Gillies first learning *ceol mor* from Keith Cameron and later from Keith’s older brother, Alexander. That Gillies deviated on occasion from Alexander’s style has been remarked on from many quarters (e.g. Campbell 1984, page 24), but he may have been simultaneously preserving the style of Keith, his first mentor in *ceol mor*.

Through Gillies, much, if not the vast majority of what is retained of Cameron playing has come to the 21st century. Gillies was a prolific and successful teacher. Robert Reid was his best known student, but others include William Gray, James Center, Iain MacPherson and a host of skilled amateurs and professionals. According to an account by Seumas MacNeill, in the four years prior to and the four years after World War One, Gillies students won half of the Gold Medals offered by the Highland Society of London (2008, pages 96-97).

This Gillies line of preservation through his students and his student’s students is what is left of a living piping tradition. It literally now amounts to a handful of active players. The following, in no particular order, are the ones with whom I am familiar:

James Barrie (student of his father, William who was in turn a Gillies and Robert Reid student)

Iain MacLeod of Jersey (student of his father and grandfather who was a Gillies student prior to 1908)

Matthew Turnbull (a student of William Connell for over 20 years, he has also worked with Iain MacLeod and James Barrie)

Greg Abbott (a student of William Connell for several years)

Brad Davidson (student of William Connell for several years)

Jacob Dicker (a William Connell student)

Robert Worrall could be added to this list. Many of his tunes he got from Connell but has subsequently “done his own thing”. I do not think he claims any Cameron partisanship.

For over three decades I have sought and learn what I could of the Cameron style from as many sources as possible. My primary mentor has been the late William Connell with whom I exchanged tapes and letters for over twenty years. Our face to face sessions were relatively few but always fruitful and treasured. I have also received encouragement and valued instruction from James Barrie. Barrie and Connell were both instructors at a weekend workshop I directed for six years that focused on the Cameron interpretation of the yearly “set tunes” of the Piobaireachd Society.

Equally critical to this discussion is the influence of James Campbell with whom I corresponded actively for the three or four years before his death. He was a fund of knowledge and reasoned appraisal. Andrew MacNeill (Colonsay) likewise was an active correspondent, a proponent and “keeper” of Robert Reid’s playing and an informed judge of piping matters.

Iain MacLeod (Jersey), who, with impeccable Cameron credentials, broadened my own appreciation of the style through letters and taped performances. And my first *piobaireachd* tutor, James McColl, had Cameron connections of his own through his tutor, Iain MacPherson (a Gillies student) and informally through Robert Reid (another Gillies student).

I would like to emphasize that this is all mainstream, competitive piping. None of my mentors could be considered “cranks” or “fringy”; perhaps not currently fashionable, but prize winning and broadly accepted in their day.

While I gratefully acknowledge the support and encouragement of my mentors and informants, they would all have disagreements with what I write. My task has not been to record the style of any one player, but to probe when possible underlying attitudes and assumptions about the music. That said, the bulk of my *ceol mor* understanding comes via William Connell, so these reflection have an inevitable Connell and perhaps Reid / Gillies flavor.

I suspect that each of my mentors believes what they themselves play --- and they differ amongst themselves to varying degrees --- is most authentic or true to the traditional/historical Cameron style. All others are suspect. I will not indulge in a discussion about which playing style or setting of a tune is more “authentic”. It is sufficient for my purposes that many fine pipers, part of the mainstream of modern piping history, have claimed to play in a Cameron style. I desire only to understand what that style is. I have perhaps made mountains of molehills. The reader may judge.

Throughout this essay I will use the term “Cameron style” as originally suggested, as a convenient label. What we have left of the playing traditions of the Cameron family has all been through the refinement of subsequent generations of artistes who, being artistes, were unlikely to be content with mere parrot playing. It may be that what I discuss here is actually unreflective of how the Cameron family played. Such has certainly been argued (see MacIntosh 1997). Yet, the evidence suggests that even the individual Cameron family members put their own stamp on the music. We should not expect anything less from their students or those student’s students. While there may have

been extensive evolution of detail, to paraphrase James Campbell, I do not think there has been much deviation from first principles. But that, I confess, is an article of faith.

PART TWO, an Overview:

The Cameron style is more than a list of musical “quirks”. While there is musical variety among the Cameron style players of my acquaintance, those traits they hold in common are the manifestations of a subtle approach, an aesthetic that evolved through the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Still, it is useful to start with an overview, a summary of characteristics of the Cameron style and some of the “quirks” of its adherents. Included will be features of a performance that the listener might note to discern a piper’s stylistic pedigree. Part Three that follows this overview, should be seen as an expansion upon it and a pushing of the discussion to an abstract level.

1. The Cameron style player tends to play smoothly with a liquid - like flow. Short notes are not so short, nor long notes quite so long. Radical change of tempo between variations is frowned upon. This is not to say that the Cameron style player never aggressively cuts a note, only that such notes are not “snatched at” or “bit-ten at” (two of Connell’s favorite pejoratives.). This flow is central to the musicality of the style.

2. The Cameron style player values consistency of interpretation. A motif played one way early in a tune will be played the same way throughout unless there is overriding reason not to. There is also a tendency to generalize from one tune to another. A motif learned in one tune can confidently be incorporated into another with little modification.

James Campbell wrote to me that once one had accumulated a repertoire of 60 or 70 tunes, any unfamiliar new tune could be worked out through analogy. Moreover, Robert Reid was apparently of the opinion that all of ceol mor was based on 22 to 24 basic phrase patterns (Andrew MacNeill, personal correspondence).

This interest in consistency and working from one tune to another by analogy is at the core of Connell’s occasional use of the term “Cameron system” to describe what he taught.

3. The Cameron style player values the lower notes of the chanter and will often prolong a low G, low A, B or D that others would shorten. Low G gracenotes are given good weight.

Delight in the bottom notes of the chanter is key to the style.

4. The Cameron style player will prefer or promote the “redundant A” movements. The staff below illustrates the redundant A version of the toarluath and how it is played. (All such staff examples in this essay are my conventions and have no necessary relationship to how Connell or any of my other mentors might depict the music on paper.)



The crunluath version is shown below. Further explanation can be found in Connell's instructional tapes.



There are also redundant A *leumluaths*, although they have received less attention by partisans of the style.

Even within the ranks of Cameron influenced players, however, these movements are a point of contention. William Gray, a Gillies student, did not advocate them, and Gillies who taught them to Reid and others was diffident. He came at one point to advocate otherwise in a signed document. On the other hand, one of my informants stated that one could not play in the Cameron style without them.

5. Taorluaths and crunluaths played from the melody note low G, will normally be played as suggested by Angus MacKay in his book of 1838: *gGdAeA* and *gGdAeAfAE*. See the following staff music illustrations.

taorluath from low G:

crunluath from low G:

This is a small point but worth noting as the currently popular John MacDonald style with two low G s seems to dominate modern performance.

6. *The Cameron style player will use fewer link or bridging notes treating as phrase endings notes that others will use as a tie to a subsequent phrase.*

This is associated with the Cameron style player s delight in the lower notes of the scale. Low G, low A, B and D are used freely as phrase endings. Examples are legion: see Reid “ I got a Kiss...”, Connell “Black Donald s March, Willie Barrie “The Princes Salute” , Reid “The Vaunting” etc.

This Cameron re-evaluation of where phrase endings lie and what is properly a bridging note is one of the features that distinguishes the style. There is no need in the Cameron way of thinking to balance note values within a time signature governed bar structure. Consequently melodic ideas can resolve themselves where the performer thinks the best musical effect is achieved.

7. *Simple two-note cadence phrases in taorluath and crunluath variations will normally be played evenly, keeping the pulse of the variation.*

8. *The Camerons style player will make frequent use of the “pre-cadence pause” in the variations of a tune, particularly crunluath variations but sometimes (according to Connell) in taorluath variations, too. This pause is associated with the presence of an introductory E as a prelude to the cadence notes proper, i.e. it is not used with simple, two-note cadences.*

How long to make this pause varies from performer to performer. James Campbell makes just the barest pause. James Barrie comes to a full resolution before the introductory E. Connell s approach lies between these two.

(NB: according to William Barrie (personal communication), this pre-cadence pause was once a common feature of many pipers performance regardless of background. It has been discarded by most modern players, but remains a conservative feature of those of a Cameron persuasion. Its rejection by others has made it almost diagnostic of the Cameron style in modern times.)

*The staff music below is an attempt to show the timing of simple two-note cadence phrases **and** introduced cadences in a crunluath variation. This is the first line of the crunluath singling from “Lament for the Earl of Antrim” which includes both forms of cadence phrase. The introductory E s are written melody note size because they to have significant duration, but they are written with the stem point up like other gracenoting to suggest their status as an embellishment. (See my introductory notes to the revisions of William Connell s instructional book.)*

LAMENT FOR THE EARL OF ANTRIM: first line crunluath singling

The musical notation is presented in three staves. The first staff contains two phrases labeled "2-Note Cadence", each consisting of two notes with stems pointing up. The second staff contains a phrase labeled "Introduced Cadence", starting with two notes and stems up, followed by a more complex rhythmic pattern. The third staff is divided into two parts: "written", showing two notes with stems up, and "played", showing a complex rhythmic pattern with many notes.

9. *The Camerons style player prefers the light throw on D (GdCD), but will emphasize the initial low G gracenote. See the above note on the importance given to the lower notes of the scale. See also Connell s instructional tapes for his technical discussion of the movement.*

10. *The Cameron style player will tend to play the piobaireachd birl movement with the introductory E shorter than the low A. In practice, the timing varies by context.*

The shortened E is recognition that the E is a grace-note embellishment, not technically part of the melody line or “tone row” of the tune. In truth, Connell tended to the currently fashionable even timed introductory E and low A melody note, but Andrew MacNeill was adamant that the E should be shorter.

11. The Cameron style player will play double echo movements as fairly compact with a strong emphasis on the second strike. Again, Connell s instructional tapes would be a good guide.

Gillies and Reid taught the double echo on D with a C strike rather than the conventional low G. Alexander Cameron, the younger, preferred the low G per Angus MacKay. The C strike presumably came to Gillies from Keith Cameron. On the other hand, according to Frank Richardson, the lighter, C strike was employed by many pipers pre-WWII regardless of pedigree. (See Campbell (ed.) 1984, page 11 and MacNeill and Richardson 1987, pages 83 , 84). The recorded instructional material by Connell is representative of the Cameron timing of such motifs regardless of the strike employed.

12. The Cameron style player tends to play taorluath breabach variations “up the way”, although there are notable exceptions. See Campbell (1948, page 19) for a discussion of exceptions. Each “kick” of the taorluath breabach motif includes a short low A (occasionally low G) followed by the breabach note proper. Connell used to remark that the melody lies in the varied upper notes, the breabach notes, not the the repetitive low A s or low G s that precede them.

Below is the doubling of the taorluath breabach variation of “ Corrienessan s Salute” written roughly as it would be played “up the way” .

taorluath breabach played "up the way":



13. Cameron style pipers exhibit subtle variety in how crunluath breabachs are played. In my experience, it is common to time the low A (occasionally low G) and breabach note of each “kick” evenly. Campbell, on the other hand, is at pains to describe Alexander Cameron s (the younger) slight emphasis on the low A of the turn.. His impression of Gillies timing was of the “kick” being even

(Campbell 1984, page 30). This even timing seems broadly accepted now and it is how Connell addresses the movement in his recorded instructional material.

Gillies and Alexander Cameron (the younger) had a distinctive twist on those crunluath breabach movements that concluded with two low A s.

While the other breabachs are played with an even swing or perhaps an emphasis of varying degree on the low A, when the breabach note itself is low A the timing changes. The initial low A is shortened and extra time added to the breabach note.

How diagnostic this is of the Cameron style, I can not say, but I am aware of only pipers of a clear Cameron background employing the technique. It is recorded by Campbell in the "Kilberry Book of Ceol Mor" and his collected notes (cf. Campbell 1948, page 19 and 1985 page 30) and I have heard it played on recordings of Reid and Andrew MacNeill. I have a recollection of James Barrie playing it too. Connell did not teach this but advocated an even swing throughout.

The staff notation that follows shows the first line of crunluath breabach variation of "Lament for MacSwan of Roaig". I have written the two "kick" notes as even, but that changes when the breabach notes are low A s.

Lament for MacSwan of Roaig: line one of crunluath breabach

The musical notation is presented in three staves. The first two staves show a sequence of notes with 'Timing change' annotations above them. The third staff shows two 'kick' notes followed by a 'played' section with a complex rhythmic pattern.

14. *The Cameron style player tends to play siubhal variations “up the way”. Phrasing such variations in fours or sometimes eights is an option.*

Following are two versions of the first line of the siubhal variation of “The Little Spree”. The first is a straight forward rendering of the siubhal played “up the way”. The initial low A s of each couplet has been presented as eighth notes (quavers) in keeping with the admonition to avoid clipped or “staccato” playing.

The second is the same variation but grouped in “phrases” of four notes. Connell’s instructional recordings will be the best guide to this interpretation. What appears below is my best rendering of Connell’s style, albeit not one of which he approved of. Think of this version as being in 6/4 time.

A side note: *Gillies taught the suibhal of “The Wee Spree” could be played correctly either “up the way” or “down the way”. Piper’s choice.*

According to Connell and Andrew MacNeill (referencing Reid on what Gillies taught) his personal preference was to play “up the way”. According to James Barrie (referencing what his father said regarding Gillies instruction) his preference was to play “down the way”.

THE WEE SPREE: first line of *suibhal* variation played “up the way”



THE WEE SPREE: first line of *suibhal* variation with notes grouped in fours



Creative, flexible groupings of notes in these “pendulum variations” ought to be thought of as interpretive options, not employed at every turn, but always an option. Iain MacLeod (Jersey), for example, whose piping pedigree is impeccable, subtly expresses this variation of the “Wee Spree” in groups of eight notes, instead of Connell’s four. The suibhal variation of “Lament for MacSwan of Roaig”, Reid plays in a regular fashion, William Barrie plays in groups of four notes like Connell’s “Wee Spree”

This level of flexibility and even adventurousness on the part of Cameron influenced pipes is also exhibited in hybrid variations that combine elements of the taorluath breabach and the suibhal. Hybrid variations of this type can be found in the following tunes:

“The MacFarlanes Gathering”

“The Bells of Perth”

“Lament for MacSwan of Roaig”

“Beloved Scotland”

“The Battle of Auldearn”

“The Lament for the Earl of Antrim”

“The Prince’s Salute”

A single example from Connell’s instructional material for “The MacFarlanes Gathering” illustrates the pattern.

THE MACFARLANES GATHERING: line one of ground doubling



Crunluath in 6/8 time:

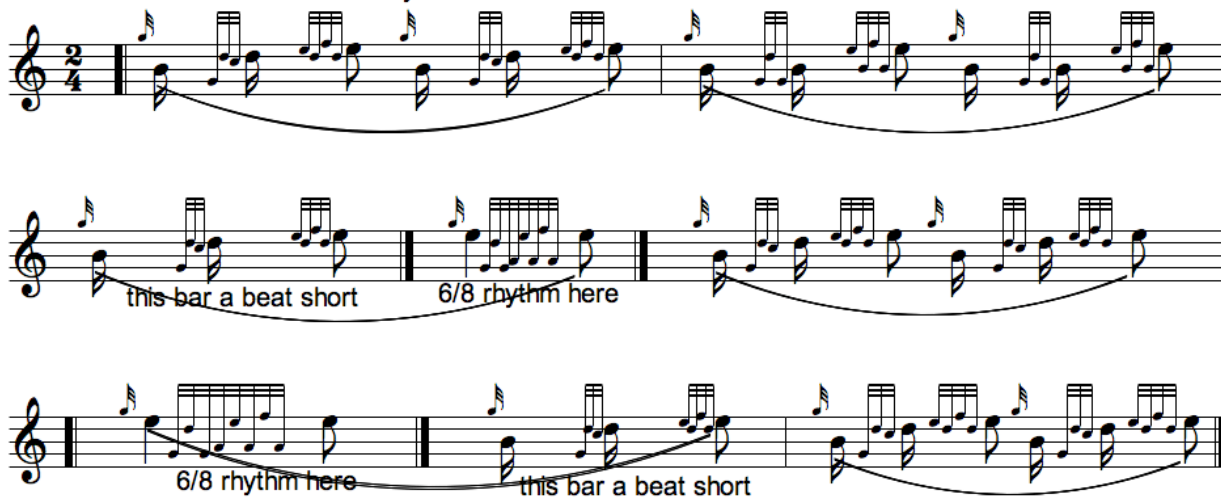


By contrast, Reid expressed the a machs evenly-- whether toarluath or crunluath -- without a dwell on the final note. He called it a 2/4 approach.

Below is the same segment of "Grain in Hides and Corn in Sacks" written to suggest Reid's timing of the a mach variation. With ties below the staff I have indicated the structural blocks that organize the tune, what most would term the "phrases".

Note that two differing rhythms can exist in a single structural unit.

Crunluath a mach with mixed rhythms:



When combined within one variation the result is a broken but patterned rhythm based on the distribution of the a mach melody notes (B, C and D). Some have uncharitably called it “erratic”. It does speak to the flexibility and adventurous musicality of this group of pipers. Connell’s instructional tapes illustrate a subtle variation on Reid’s pattern.

17. A low A melody note graced with a low G gracenote is rarely cut nor treated as a bridging note. This is most evident in the timing of cadence phrases with a concluding low A. This seems to be a response to the heavy accent afforded by the low G gracenote and the importance of the fundamental of the scale.

This “rule” can also influence timing of notes within a ground. Campbell noted the opening motifs of “Lament for Donald of Laggan” as an instance in which the low A graced with a low G embellishment, ought not to be shortened (see Campbell (ed.) 1984, page 12).

From Andrew MacNeill comes another example: “Kinlochmoidart’s Lament”. He presented the opening motifs somewhat like the staff version below. The small motifs that make up the melody are noted by “ties”. (See the introductory notes to the revisions to William Connell’s instructional book.)

KINLOCHMOIDART'S LAMENT No. 1 with broad low A:

18. The “Donald Mor Rundown” played as a tumbling-down-the-scale movement is always an option. Here is the “rundown” as it is conventionally written and how it is often interpreted as a non-tumble down motif: an introductory E and three-note phrase.

Donald Mor Rundown:

William Barrie and William Connell broaden the the D gracenote to melodic length, roughly equal in duration to the following B and low A. Andrew MacNeill and Robert Reid kept the D as a short gracenote to B. While these are truly runs down the scale, they should not be rushed.

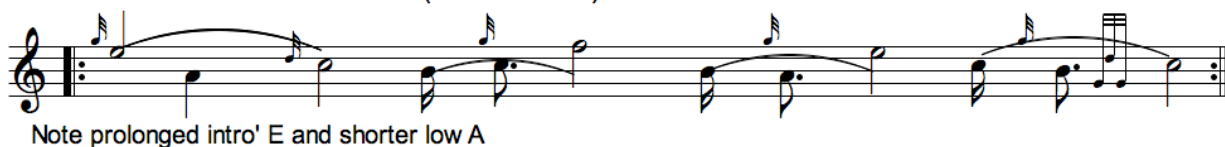


Some commentators suggest that the rundown played as a tumbling down movement is inappropriate for a tune expressed as a lament. In my experience Connell used it universally. Reid employed it in “Lament for MacSwan of Roaig” but did not use it (Andrew MacNeill, personal correspondence) in “The Mac Leods Salute”. This is clearly a question of taste as opposed to a mandate.

19. The introductory E is conceived of as an embellishment, regardless of its length or melodic impact. Generally, it should not dominate a musical motif. Alexander Cameron (the younger) seemed to adhere to that principle most consistently. Gillies and his students are more adventurous. They offer several deviations from the first principle, some of which become stereotypic.

According to Andrew MacNeill, Reid s general practice was to lengthen the E to significant melody note length when the following note was a low A --- as in the opening motif of “MacCrimmon s Sweetheart”. If the note following was a low G, then the introductory E was relatively short and the low G emphasized -- as in the opening motif of “The Bells of Perth”.

MACCRIMMON'S SWEETHEART (based on Reid):



THE BELLS OF PERTH (based on Reid):

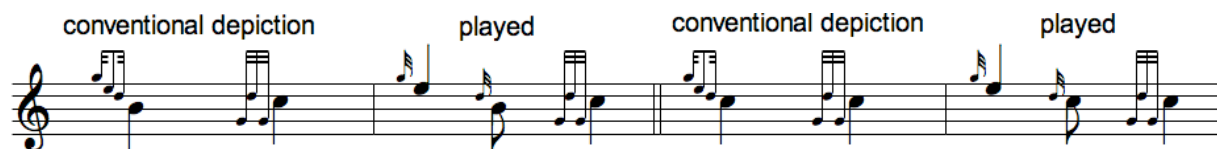


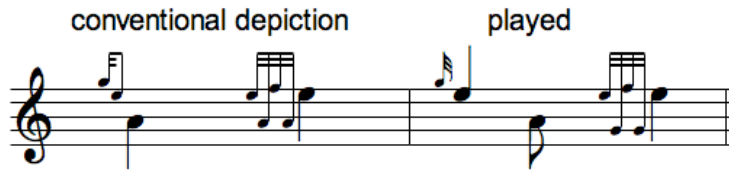
On the other hand , William Barrie prefers an introduction to “The Bells of Perth” like Reid s version of “MacCrimmon s Sweetheart”, i.e. with an extended introductory E and a shortened low G. Exploring with these introductory E s, length ening them, shortening them, introducing variety seem characteristic of the Cameron influenced players.

Another case of deviation from first principle that takes on a rule like quality is in the motif gE dB lowGdC D (introductory E to B followed by a D throw). The Cameron influenced piper will often extend the introductory E; that extended E takes duration from the following B. The rhythm becomes Long - Short - Long, sometimes Even - Even - Long. Below is the motif as commonly presented and conventionally played. Then the Cameron presentation:



By analogy a similar rhythm may be employed in other motifs where the introductory E graces a lower note which is then followed by a grip or throw to a note of the same pitch or higher up the pipe scale. Campbell remarks on this (1984, page 34) but seems to restrict the application to motifs with embellishments from B.





To summarize, one may recognize a Cameron influenced piper by the following characteristics:

- fluidity of expression, severely cut notes are rare
- consistency of interpretation
- emphasis on lower notes of the chanter that are often employed as phrase endings
- second strike of double echo embellishments given good weight
- use of the so-called 'light' D-throw
- fewer link or bridging notes
- Donald Mor rundowns often played as tumble down motifs
- redundant A movements
- low G taorluaths and crunluaths per MacKay's book
- simple two note cadences are usually timed evenly in the variations
- a pre-cadence pause before an introductory E in the *crunlutath* variations (at least)
- most *taroluath breabachs* and *siubhal* variations are played "up the way"
- flexible phrasing of "pendulum variations", perhaps phrasing notes in groups of four or eight
- crunluath breabachs* mostly to be even timed or very nearly so; some variety in expression among different pipers and tune to tune; good weight to the low A of the "kick" is characteristic.
- use of an *a mach* to conclude *fosgailte* tunes
- *crunluath a mach* may be played in two time signatures

-- generally introductory E's are thought of as embellishments, not melody notes; introductory E of the piobaireachd birl movement often shorter than the low A melody note; in certain stereotyped contexts introductory E's may be lengthened at the expense of the following note

-- low A's accented with a low G gracenote are rarely shortened especially if they conclude a cadence phrase.

Warnings:

Not all of these characteristics are equally diagnostic.

Not all are found in any one piper's performance style.

Some would be rejected by one or more of my informants.

There are modern pipers with no Cameron claim or interest who adopt some of these traits. They are, in many cases, still part of the collective performance culture.

Even with the above caveats, and recognizing that a performance style is more than a collection of "quirks", familiarity with the features discussed above will go a fair way toward recognizing the Cameron influenced performance and this sets the stage for Part Three.

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