

It's a Bit of a Scottish Fling

Text and photographs by Alistair & Jan Campbell

From Wester Ross to Nova Scotia, the ancient tradition of Highland games and gatherings are celebrated far beyond their traditional Scottish boundaries. Gatherings can be found as far afield as New Zealand, USA, Canada and Brazil. Making these festivals of athleticism, music and dance one of Scotland's most successful cultural exports.



Ballater & District Pipe Band at Braemar Gathering

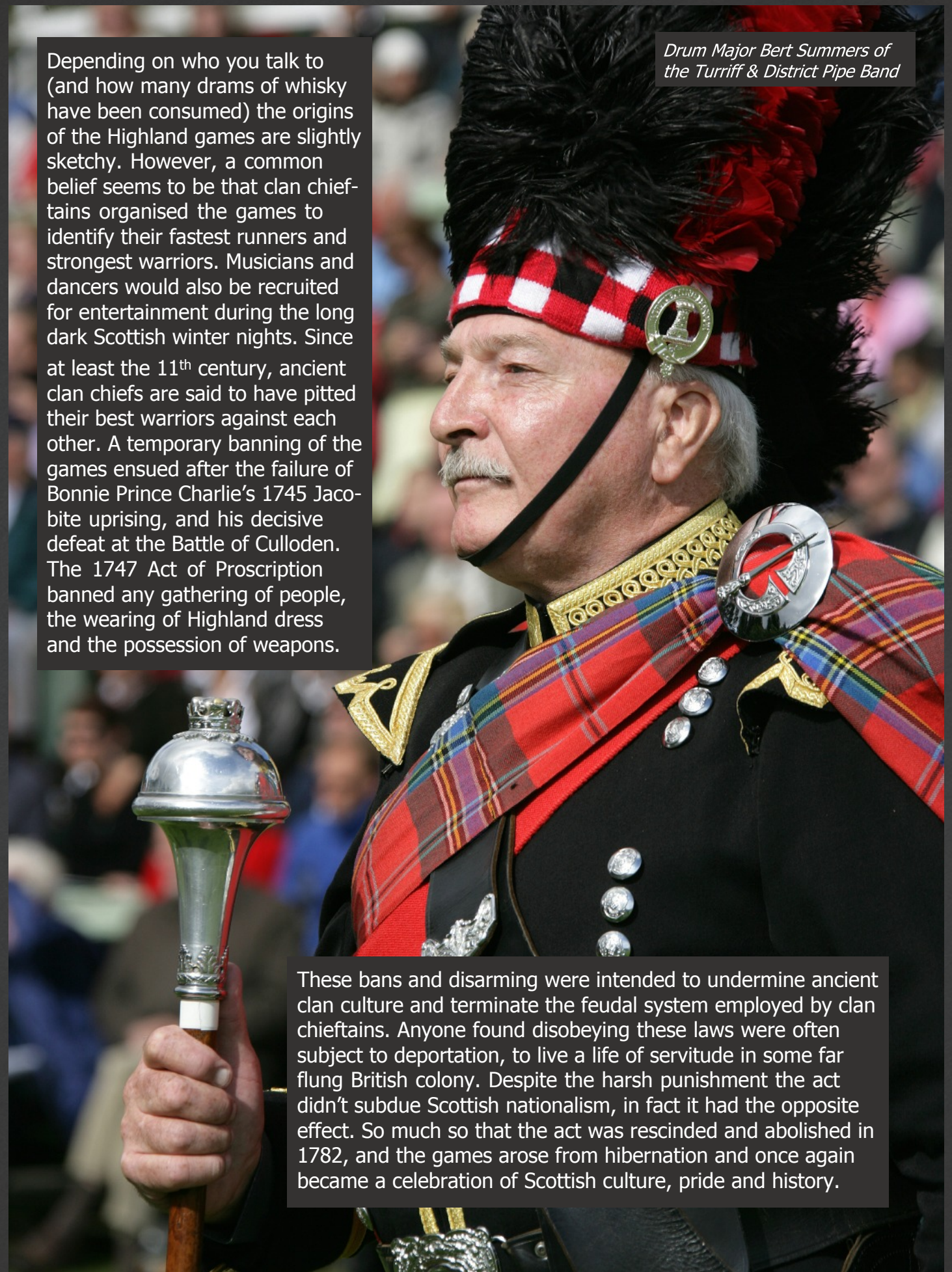
Among the Highlands and Lowlands of Scotland, there are over 80 different game venues. Every weekend from May to mid-September the games will provide a heady mixture of physical and creative events. All of which will ensure that your visual and hearing senses are fully occupied. Watch out (quite literally) for the 'heavies', the term used to describe events such as tossing the caber, hammer and stone – in fact almost anything that is heavy and can be thrown, will be. Running, jumping, tug o war etc. are classed as light events, as are Highland dancing and bagpipe competitions. Many of these events will be taking place at the same time, and it's not unusual to see runners sprinting past people who are throwing things, that are landing just short of dancers, who are trying not to be distracted by marching bagpipe bands, whom in turn are trying to avoid the runners. Perhaps I exaggerate ever so slightly, but nonetheless the arena is an exhilarating hive of sound and activity.



Putting the Stone at the Braemar Gathering



No games would be complete without marching kilted bagpipe bands. Some say that the bagpipes are like Marmite, you either love them or hate them. I personally love them, but then again with a name like Alistair Campbell it would be nothing less than national treason to say otherwise. Swirling kilts and the sound of the bagpipes is akin to an ancient call to arms or, alternatively, the sign of a good party. I have often wondered if the bagpipes stir the same level of rebellious emotion in non-Scottish nationals. It would be unfair to ask a Highland games tourist if they enjoy the almost cacophonous skirling and wailing of the massed bagpipe bands. Especially when they are surrounded by men (and ladies) in kilts, who are either throwing heavy things around the field or puffing life into five legged leather bags – I know what my answer would be.

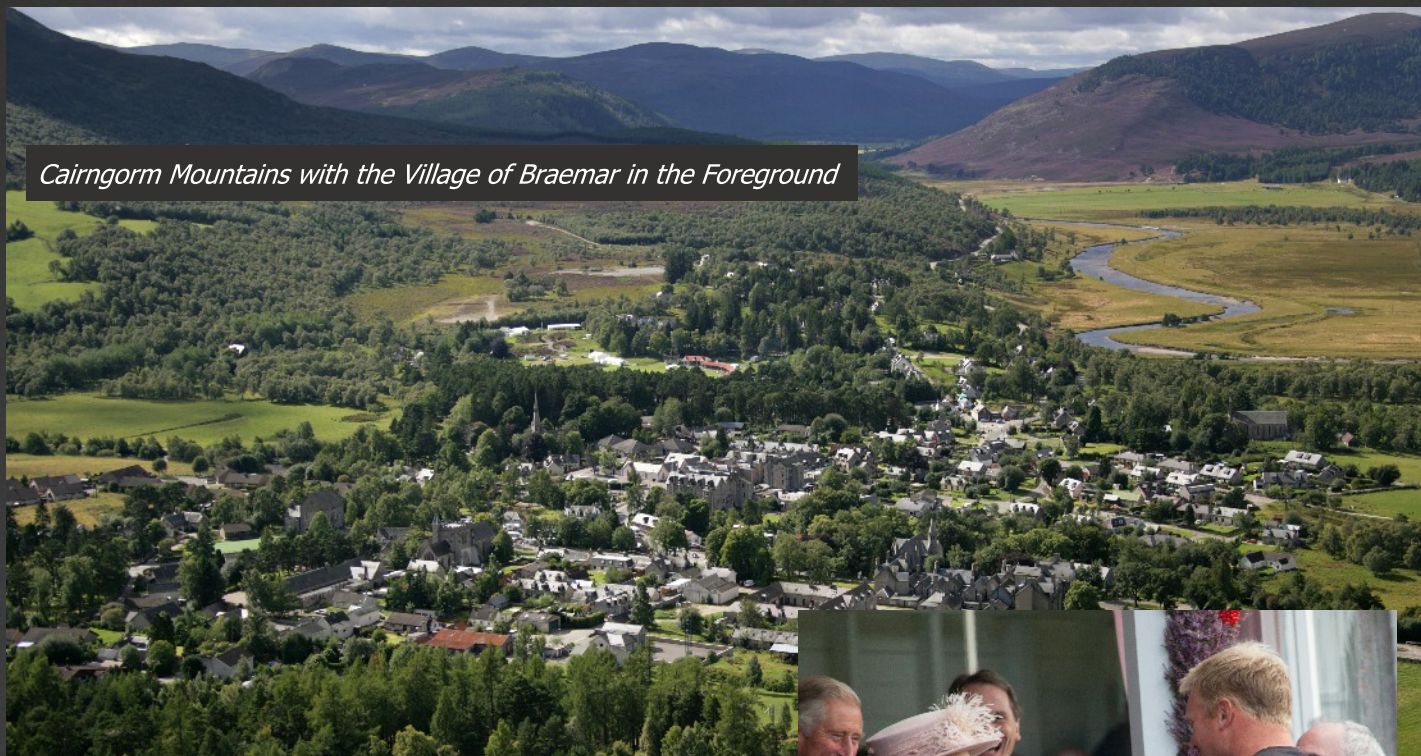


Depending on who you talk to (and how many drams of whisky have been consumed) the origins of the Highland games are slightly sketchy. However, a common belief seems to be that clan chieftains organised the games to identify their fastest runners and strongest warriors. Musicians and dancers would also be recruited for entertainment during the long dark Scottish winter nights. Since at least the 11th century, ancient clan chiefs are said to have pitted their best warriors against each other. A temporary banning of the games ensued after the failure of Bonnie Prince Charlie's 1745 Jacobite uprising, and his decisive defeat at the Battle of Culloden. The 1747 Act of Proscription banned any gathering of people, the wearing of Highland dress and the possession of weapons.

Drum Major Bert Summers of the Turriff & District Pipe Band

These bans and disarming were intended to undermine ancient clan culture and terminate the feudal system employed by clan chieftains. Anyone found disobeying these laws were often subject to deportation, to live a life of servitude in some far flung British colony. Despite the harsh punishment the act didn't subdue Scottish nationalism, in fact it had the opposite effect. So much so that the act was rescinded and abolished in 1782, and the games arose from hibernation and once again became a celebration of Scottish culture, pride and history.

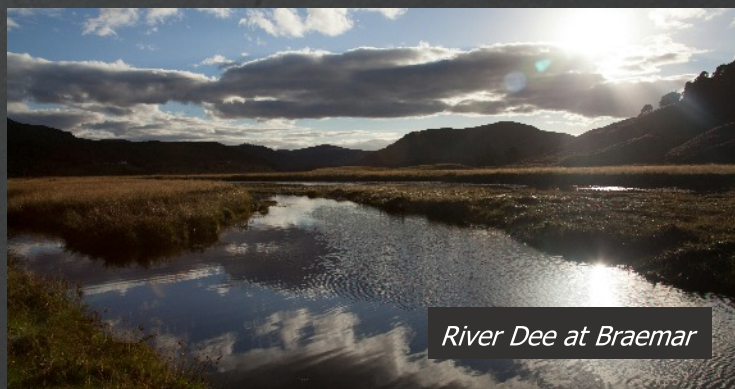
Cairngorm Mountains with the Village of Braemar in the Foreground



With roots dating from the reign of King Malcolm III of Scotland (1031 to 1093), the Braemar Gathering continues to attract Royal patronage. Since her first attendance in 1848, Queen Victoria was a regular visitor to the games as is our reigning monarch. I'm sure (but can't officially confirm) that this is no ordinary Royal duty for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. The relaxed smiles and laughter on the faces of all attending members of the Royal party, are very genuine. With this aristocratic pedigree, it is of little surprise that the picturesque village of Braemar is host to one of the most prestigious Highland games in the world. Myself and my wife Jan often travel in excess of 500 miles from our home to attend the games, which always take place on the first Saturday of September. Highland games, and especially the Braemar Gathering, is Scottish pageantry at its very best. However, these events are not ostentatious, pretentious or thespian. They most certainly are not performed just for the sake of the many tourists who are in attendance. The men, women and children who compete are there in pursuit of personal betterment. Don't let the big party atmosphere fool you the music, dance and athlete competitors take their individual disciplines very seriously – but win or lose, most will probably have a shindig afterwards.



*Braemar Prize Given by
HM Queen Elizabeth II*

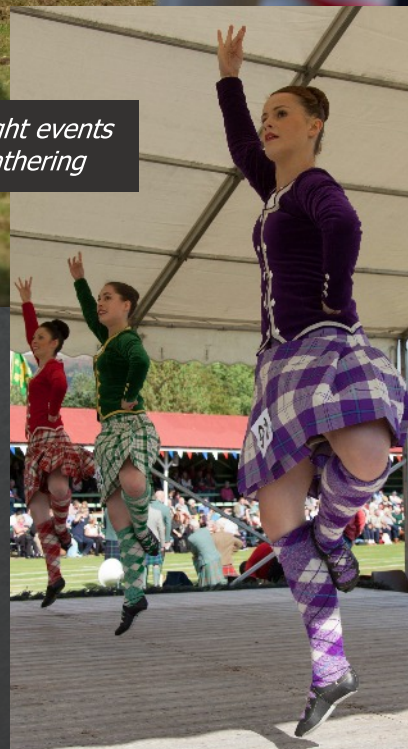


River Dee at Braemar

If you are Scottish, the Braemar Gathering will raise your spirits and patriotism to new levels, and if you're not Scottish you will wish you were. At very least you will be expected to depart our borders with something made of tartan, a bottle or two of whisky, a large tin of shortbread or even a Red Hot Chili Pipers bagpipe CD. Perhaps some personal genealogy research will reveal that you have a little Scottish ancestry. After all, as a nation the people of Scotland (like the Irish) have colonised and influenced the world far beyond that expected of such a small country. If you dare ask a Scot the question 'what have the Scots ever done for us', you will receive an almost nationally rehearsed response which will include names of historical Scottish figures like; Alexander Fleming, John Logie Baird, Alexander Graham Bell, William Wallace, James Watt, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, and even J K Rowling. The list goes on and on and on.



*Mixture of heavy and light events
at Braemar Highland Gathering*



*Drum Major Fiona Glennie of the
Ballater & District Pipe Band*

Where the Irish had potato famines to encourage migration, the Scot's had the Highland Clearances. Some of the Scottish immigrants probably voluntary opted to live in a country where, for just five minutes it didn't rain, and we could forget about the lost battles with our English neighbours. Still, you can neither change your countries history or climate, and in the wise words of our adopted national anthem "*those days are past now, and in the past they must remain*". Or perhaps a more adapt quotation from one of our many national heroes "*We'll take a Cup of Kindness yet, for the sake of Auld Lang Syne*". And with my cup of kindness in hand, I will bid you "*Slainte*" to which you should always reply "*Your good health*".