For Scots and non-Scots alike, the sounds of the bagpipes and the pipe band serve as a cultural metaphor for Scottish identity: the skirl of the pipes, the crisp sound of the snare drums, and the unique lilt of the music conjure an imagined Scotland of fierce, kilted clansmen and rugged, picturesque Highland scenery. This nearly global association appears to have been constructed on a series of transformations of cultural practices within Scotland itself, as well as throughout greater Britain and the lands of the Scottish diaspora, that began with the early “kiltophiles” in the late eighteenth century. Then, in the nineteenth century, its appeal was rendered greater by the romanticization of the Highlander in British literature, Queen Victoria’s affinity for summer holidays at Balmoral Castle, expanded pipe band use in the British Army, and the formation of Scottish heritage societies embracing Highland dress, music, and sport. The turn of the twentieth century saw the pipe band move beyond military spheres to serve a range of civic and social purposes within Scotland, and throughout the subsequent hundred-plus year period, pipe bands as community musical ensembles have spread throughout the lands of the Scottish diaspora and other areas of the globe.

Although there were and are a range of organizations, practices, and trends that offer insight into cultural developments within Scotland and the Scottish diaspora, the primary goal of this dissertation is to study the role of the pipe band in the construction and transformation of Scottish identity through an examination of the meanings, values, and musical practices that are built into ideas of "Scottishness" from the mid-nineteenth through the twenty-first century in the British Isles and North America. In its consideration of late twentieth- to twenty-first-century North American pipe bands, it will cast special light on selected bands of the Southeast and Ohio Valley regions, using two ensembles, the Kentucky United Pipes and Drums and the Knoxville Pipes and Drums, and one Highland festival, the Scotland County Highland Games, as case studies of present-day practices, but also as windows into identity formation within and through bands of the past.
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