Rethinking the Revival of the Glengarry Highland Games: Modernity, Identity, and Tourism in Rural Canada

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Introduction

In the sweltering summer of July 1998, a research team representing the Gaelic service of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) arrived in Glengarry, Canada. The Eastern Ontario county, located on the border between the provinces of Ontario and Quebec, played host to the five-person crew for over a week. The purpose of their trip was to film a multipart television series documenting Scottish Highland culture in Canada. In pursuit of Highland cultural remnants, the crew traveled to Lochiel, Dunvegan, Glen Nevis, Laggan, and other small rural towns with names reminiscent of the Highland regions from where the county’s earlier residents emigrated. After visits to various historic sites, the crew filmed the event that initially drew them to the region, the Glengarry Highland Games. The BBC crew’s experiences in the county and at the games was captured in a Scottish documentary entitled The Immigrants, which originally aired in Gaelic. The very presence of the BBC Gaelic Service in a small rural region of central Canada alludes to the fundamental focus of this article—the role of broader socioeconomic transformations in compelling residents to (re)imagine their identities in ways that led to a revival of the Highland Games in Glengarry County.

A Highland Games festival was first established in Glengarry by Scottish immigrants as early as the 1840s, but the games were only celebrated a few years before the practice was discontinued. In 1948, after more than a century, the Glengarry Highland Games were revived and have, over time, formed an important part of the county’s cultural heritage and identity. The historiography of Glengarry County from the late nineteenth century leading up to 1948 demonstrates how socioeconomic changes associated with modernity led to the revival of the Highland Games. Although modernity is a complicated set of ideas that appear in a variety of disciplines with varying definitions, for the purpose of this study modernity refers to cultural responses shaped by a diverse set of socioeconomic changes generated by scientific and technological innovations and wide-scale urbanization patterns related to the stages of industrialization. Based on primary sources in the form of

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oral histories, government archives, historical literature, and newspaper reports, this article investigates socioeconomic changes that contributed to the revival of the Highland Games in Glengarry by exploring two fundamental questions: (a) What factors contributed to the 1948 revival of the Glengarry Games? and (b) How were cultural festivals constituted as modern responses to identity crises and ethnic struggles in rural Canadian communities during a period of profound socioeconomic change?

Beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing into the middle of the twentieth century, various changes to Glengarry life created identity crises in the rural county and contributed to the revival of the games. The expansion of the Franco-Ontarian population, which changed the established power relations of the region by influencing the county’s economy, political system, and culture, contributed to identity crises within the Scottish community and consequently became a significant factor in the revival of the Games. This ethnic struggle between two communities fueled antimodernist sentiment during this period. Antimodernism refers to the resistance that was sparked by numerous socioeconomic transformations that began to influence the lives of Glengarry residents. The influences of urbanization, technological advancements, rural depopulation, the World Wars, and economic recession had an impact on the entire community and contributed to escalating identity crises within the county that affected all residents regardless of their individual ethnicities. Moreover, economic factors such as the rise of a promising tourism industry, which is also connected to modernity, cannot be discounted in the revival. In the late 1940s, tourism dollars were an attractive feature of the games to the residents of Glengarry County, a district devastated by the remnants of World War II and the depression.

In the midtwentieth century, this festival was revived as a response to changing socioeconomic conditions related to modernity that fueled an identity crisis and consequently compelled Glengarry residents to (re)imagine their communities. Although the genesis of the festival lies deep in the roots of a Highland Scottish settlement in Upper Canada, the Highland Games are still an active component of the local culture and identity in Glengarry County during the twenty-first century. The games in Glengarry celebrate Scottish cultural practices and the historical imaginary of a distinctive Highland society.

**Theoretical Approach**

Before exploring the revival of the Glengarry Highland Games, it is critical to situate this article in relation to the germane works on the transmission of Scottish cultural practices and their respective theoretical orientations. Although sport historians and sporting discourses in general might be more familiar with the works of Gerald Redmond and Grant Jarvie, this article draws from a different base of theoretical perspectives. Whereas the works of Redmond offer a concise history of various Scottish cultural practices in North America, his research does not provide the theoretical tools required to address the broader research questions concerning the (re)production of Gaelic identities. Although Jarvie’s influential scholarship does present a theoretical framework for an analysis of the celebration and transmission of Scottish cultural practices from a mainly Scottish perspective, his works focus