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Maple Leaf Shinty

This presentation has as its focus the influence of the stick and ball game known as shinty on Canada's sporting heritage, and as a cultural anchor, particularly in the Maritime area. It draws on the contributor's unique understanding and interpretation of surviving fragments of the Gaelic oral tradition which have hitherto remained unexplored.

Shinty's experience in the Americas, and Canada in particular, represents the game's fluctuating fortunes in many ways. It was natural that settler should seek to protect their Scottishness and establish a new form of that identity. For a game to have such an impact on the other side of the world and at the same time die out in its authentic form within less than two generations, however, represents an aspect of cultural collapse and missed opportunity in a grand scale which bears examination.

The presentation is primarily concerned with the survival of shinty through the Gaelic oral tradition with special reference to the continuation of customs associated with Hogmanay and the celebration of Old New Year - Oidhche Challuinn. The game's place in the wider sporting life of the Americas is examined, placing it in its historical context in relation to other stick and ball games. Shinty's provenance as the apparent progenitor of ice hockey provides a specific issue, in terms of the sporting legacy. The precise degree to which shinty influenced the development of sport in Canada is explored against the background of non-linear development of folk-culture. The perception that Scots "gave" Canada ice hockey is challenged. It is argued that such suggestions are a complete oversimplification and romantic nonsense.

The survival of shinty and the associated celebration of New Year in Canada and Cape Breton in particular is analysed, in counter-point to the stereotypical celebration of Scottishness through Highland Games and Gatherings, which historically invariably fail to recognise this most Scottish of sports.

The presentation offer is a corrective view of what survives of Scotland's sporting heritage in the North American diaspora, comparing the emigre experience in the northern hemisphere with that of the Antipodean manifestation of the same experience. The differing fortunes of Shinty and curling are examined, and avenues explored through which sporting and cultural links between North America and Scotland have been and could still be strengthened, based on a shared sporting and cultural heritage.

Ice hockey continues to be the ultimate and authentic expression of Canadian culture, in a way in which shinty has failed to impinge on the Scottish consciousness. Caledonian Games and Gatherings, with all their attendant pseudo-historical performance, bogus artefacts and general fabrication are now the cultural icons representing Scotland's heritage. This presentation examines why shinty and ice hockey survive in completely contrasting forms, reflecting in Canada's case the identity of a nation and in Scotland the struggle for that same cultural recognition.

Shinty's failure to survive in Canada in a meaningful shape or form is the result of the combination of a unique set of factors involving linguistic transfer, religion, demography and the environment. The links between ice hockey and shinty are incontrovertible. However, it is completely wrong to suggest however that one led to the other and that ice hockey's emergence as Canada's national sport - albeit on a shared basis - was some sort of cultural or sporting anchor dropped by the Scots in their hour of distress.