

# The Fife

*An Ulster musical tradition*



**Ulster-Scots  
Community  
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Visit any village or townland in mid Antrim on a pleasant summer's evening and it's quite possible that your ears will reverberate to the sound of the Lambeg drum, Ulster's unique percussion instrument. However, move a little closer and you may also hear the shrill, lilting tones of the Lambeg's preferred instrument of accompaniment, the fife. This simplest form of flute is the perfect partner to the Lambeg, as its high pitched melodies can be heard above the tremendous volume of the goat-skinned drum.

Although the Lambeg drum remains popular all across Ulster, the fifing tradition has survived mainly in Co. Antrim, particularly around Ballymena and its satellite villages. However, photographs and paintings of Orange parades from the early 1900's clearly show the fife being played with the Lambeg drum in places such as Belfast and Portadown, as painted by celebrated Ulster artists William Conor and John Lavery respectively.

The fife is a simple flute-like instrument - a single hollow tube corked at one end with an embouchure (mouth-hole), six finger holes and is usually made of hardwood. This simplicity of design has ensured that the fife has not changed much in hundreds of years, unlike the flute which has evolved into many different forms using different keys, pads and mechanisms. As the fife has remained constant, so has its repertoire. Today, the Ulster fife is mainly used to play hornpipes and jigs suited to accompanying the distinct rhythms of the Lambeg drum. These tunes have not changed much in the last 150 years. Local melodies such as "The Boys of Belfast" and "Banks of Kellswater" are played alongside Scottish tunes such as "Hundred Pipers" and "Orange and Blue" and traditional Irish fiddle tunes such as "Paddy O'Carrol" and Father O'Flynn". Other tunes, such as "The Boyne Water" and "The Protestant Boys" point to the fife's association with Orangeism, and in particular the Battle of the Boyne.

It is widely accepted in Ulster folklore that Lambeg drums owe their origins to the large stave drums carried by King William III's troops en route to the Battle of the Boyne in the summer of 1690. Alongside these drums, the fife was also an integral instrument in battlefield communication. William's multi-national European



infantry would almost certainly have reacted to field signals relayed by fife and drum, as had been the European precedent for several centuries.

The Italian statesman, Machiavelli, in his 1521 treatise *Libro della arte della guerre*, instructed that infantry should obey the drum and fife calls and the cavalry respond to the trumpet. The oldest known fife and drum manuscript is *Ein guettes feldgeschray schwaitzerisch*, a Swiss Field Call, found in the Fundaziun Planta, (15th – 16th century documents held in the Samedan Library, St. Moritz, Switzerland). Eye-witness accounts from the 14th century refer to Swiss use of cross-blown fifes and drums to signal directions to their pikemen during battle. Most fife and drum traditions trace back to the Swiss mercenaries of the early Renaissance.

Documentation from the early 16th century states that for signals, a Landsknecht regiment of Swiss mercenaries had 21 drummers and 21 fifers. They would mass in the middle of the 4000 strong formation to be loud enough to be heard above the noise of battle. The Feldobrist (commander) required his Staff Drummer and Fifer to train these battlefield signalers. This military position was the earliest incarnation of the Drum Major. The Tambourin-Major was an appointment first made in 1651 by King Louis XIV of France. King Louis XIV's French troops, fighting on James II side at the Battle of the Boyne, would therefore almost certainly have had their own fifers and drummers relaying field signals as well.

The Ulster-Scots and English planters who fought for King William III at the Boyne in 1690 absorbed the fife and drum into Ulster folk culture in the 18th Century. William was remembered as "the Great Deliverer" and became a hero to the protestant settlers and, in his memory, Orange clubs and societies were formed which paraded to meetings and demonstrations, often accompanied by fifes and drums which evoked memories of 1690.

Following the formation of the Orange Order in 1795 and its subsequent rapid

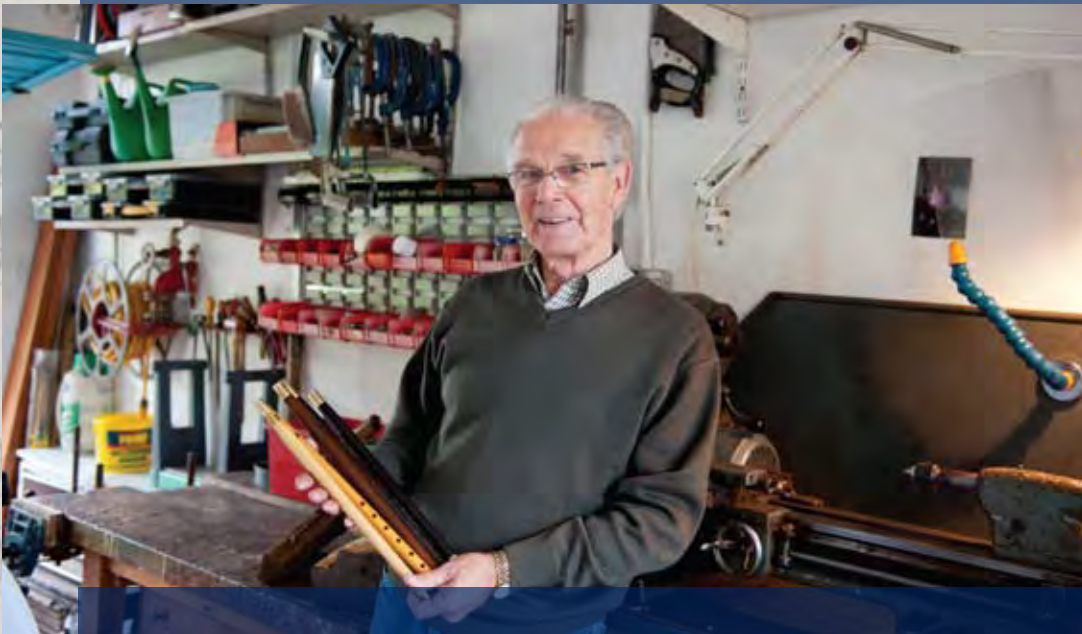


*Schomberg Fife and Drum, Kilkeel.*



expansion, an ever increasing number of musicians were required to provide music for the growing number of processions. Soon the fife and drum could be heard in every corner of Ulster.

As the British military fife and drum tradition evolved, so too did Orange musical traditions, and in the early decades of the 19th century many Lodges began to form flute bands. These ensembles were to become the foundation of today's Ulster marching band movement.



Co. Antrim fife maker Wilby Wilson with a selection of fifes in front of his lathe. When asked if he played his own instruments Wilby stated, "Harry Ferguson made tractors but he was a terrible ploughman!"



Some of the timbers used in the production of traditional Ulster fifes. In this picture we can see Greenheart, European Boxwood and Japanese Boxwood. Boxwood would have been abundant in Ulster in the 18th and 19th centuries as it was widely used for spindles on the looms in the linen industry. The piece of Japanese boxwood shown here (pale block of wood at bottom) came from an extremely old tree, well over a thousand years old.





Wilby demonstrating how African Blackwood looks at different stages of fife production. African Blackwood is a very dense timber, used in the production of many woodwind instruments including the Highland Bagpipes and the flutes used by many of Ulster's marching bands. The timber is only available to import today from sustainable sources. The Blackwood comes to Wilby in long rectangular blocks. He then removes the sharp corners (a process he describes as "dressing") to allow the block to be turned on the lathe. The block furthest to the left in the picture is ready to be turned, the rod in the middle has been turned on the lathe but not bored, and the finished fife shows how the Blackwood will eventually look at the end of the process.







Here Wilby is dressing a piece of Greenheart with a hatchet, in preparation for turning it on the lathe. Greenheart is used in marine structures such as piers, as it is dense, strong and naturally resistant to submersion in water. This piece of Greenheart was salvaged from Larne harbour, although the tree is native to Central and South America.



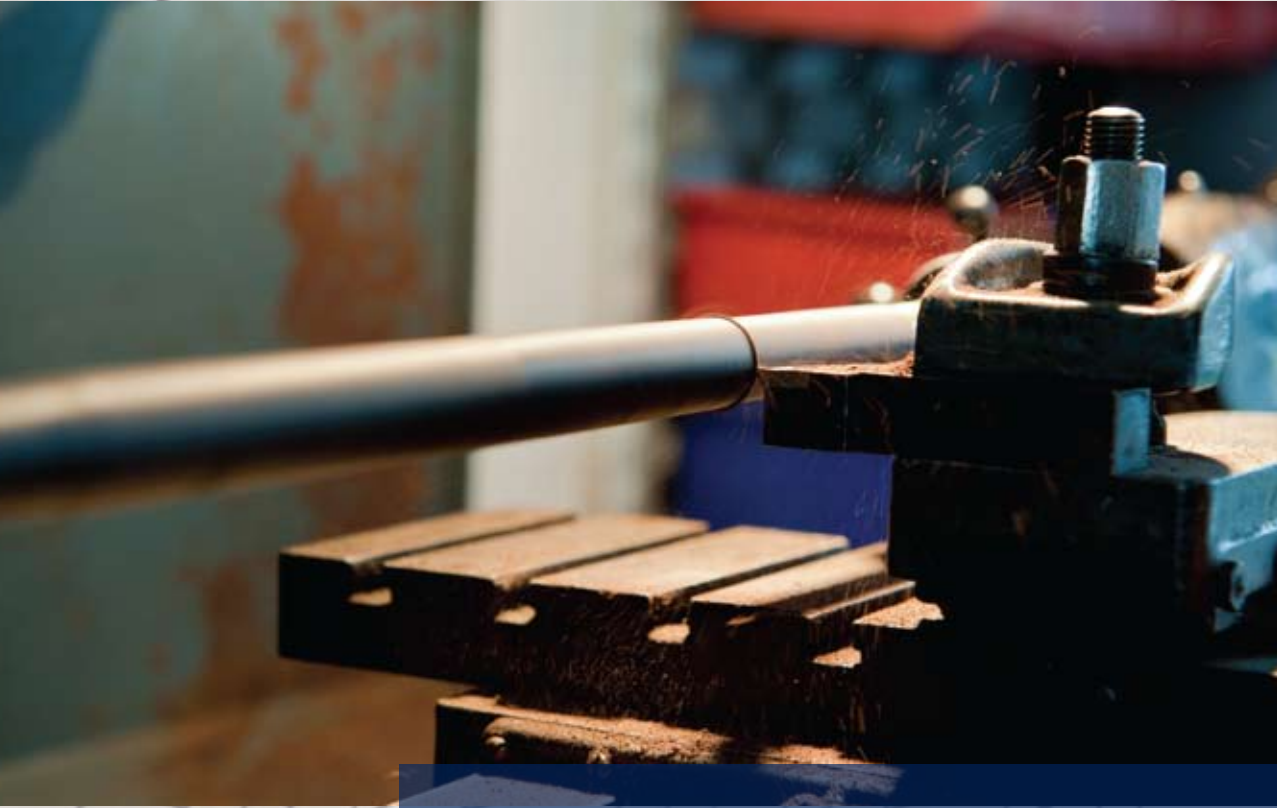
After the piece of wood has been turned on the lathe to become perfectly cylindrical, the solid rod is then bored out. Wilby prefers to bore his fifes using an Imperial 7/16 inch drill bit, modified to suit this particular task. When boring the fife, Wilby maintains that finding the optimum drilling speed for each type of wood is essential for ensuring a smooth finish.





Once the internal bore of the fife has been completed, it is then time to drill the finger holes and embouchure (mouth hole). Wilby secures the fife into a block of wood with a “V” shaped groove using gaffer tape before positioning the drill. The six finger holes are drilled with a  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch bit, and the embouchure with a  $\frac{3}{8}$  inch bit.





The fife is then turned on the lathe again. At this stage, the desired shape is achieved, ensuring a smooth, progressive taper from the bottom of the fife widening gradually up to its thickest point, several inches below the embouchure, before tapering down again to the top end of the instrument. When asked what measurements are applicable for the appropriate taper, Wilby responds “Just until it looks right.” The dimensions of Wilby’s fifes are based on replicating the size and shape of traditional instruments dating back well over 100 years.





Near the end of the process, both ends of the fife are reduced in diameter very slightly to accommodate brass ferules. These ferules add decoration to the instrument, and also afford the ends of the fife some protection.



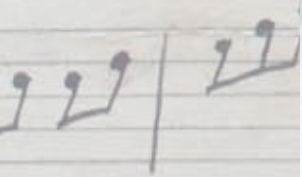
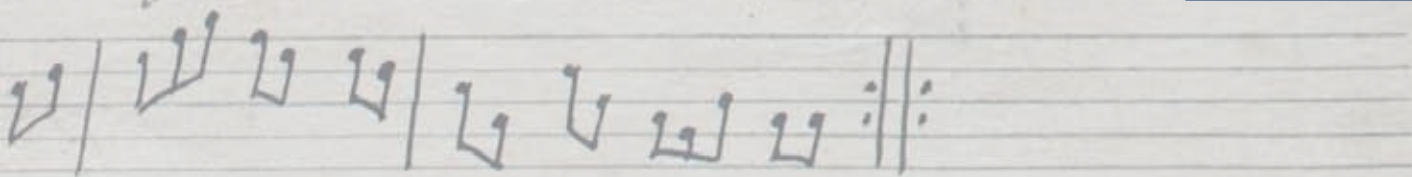
After the fife has been shaped, it is rubbed down with steel wool to leave a smooth finish.



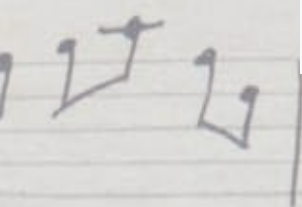
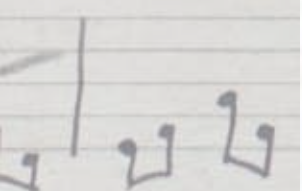
Once the ferrules have been added, the fife is submerged for 3 days in a light olive oil. The wood absorbs some of the oil in this time, which will stop it from drying out in the long term, and enable the instrument to be played and last for many years. The final task required to complete the fife involves a small cork plug being cut and inserted at the embouchure end to seal it off completely. Care has to be taken to ensure that cork is positioned in the same place for every fife, as any difference in the length from the bottom of the fife to the cork can lead to slight differences in pitch, which can make several fifes playing in unison sound out of tune.



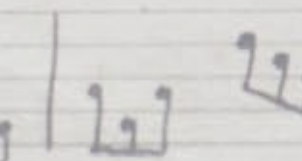
Belfast.



Pocket



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### *A Famous Fifer*

William Johnston of Ballykilbeg was a legend in his own lifetime, primarily for his opposition to the Party Processions Act of 1850 which proscribed Orange parades. A minor County Down landowner whose estate was at Ballykilbeg, near Downpatrick, Johnston organized and headed a huge Orange parade from Newtownards to Bangor on 12 July 1867 in defiance of the oppressive Act.

Contrary to the wise advice of the Chief Secretary for Ireland, the Conservative Government foolishly insisted on prosecuting Johnson for defying the legislation and at the Spring Assizes of February 1868, Johnston was sentenced to two months imprisonment in Downpatrick Gaol. Johnston's brief prison martyrdom conferred upon him heroic status and enabled him to be elected as one of the two MPs for Belfast at the General Election of November 1868.

As an MP he successfully campaigned for the repeal of the Act and achieved this outcome during the lifetime of a single Parliament, a truly stunning achievement which very few MPs have ever been able to match.

While Johnston's principal claim to fame remains his successful opposition to the Party Processions Act and his assertion of 'the right to march', he was also a prolific journalist, novelist and author, writing several Orange ballads, including 'The Orange and Blue' and 'The Orange Standard'. The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) holds the manuscripts.



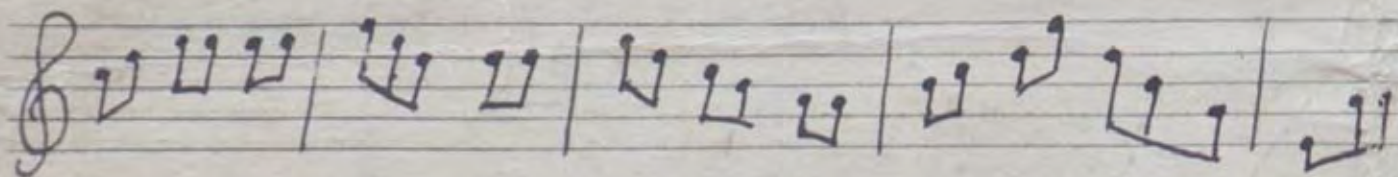
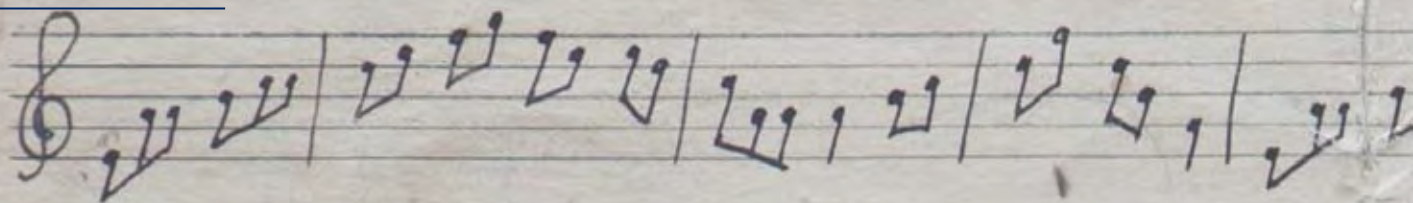
*William Johnston of Ballykilbeg's fife.*



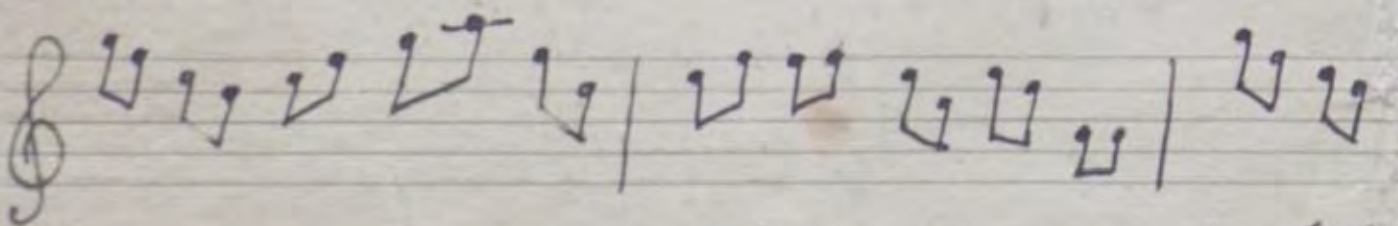
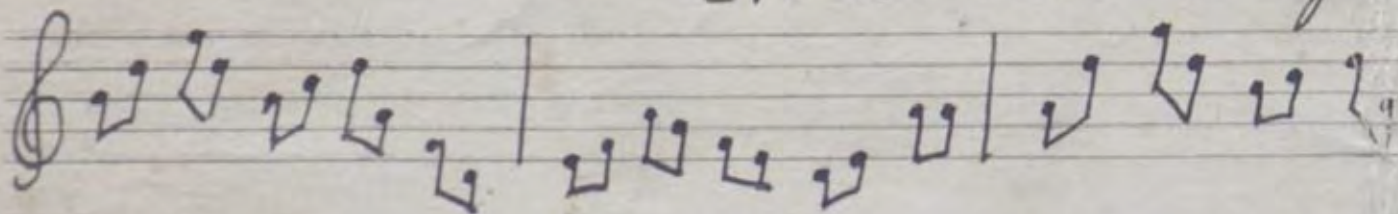




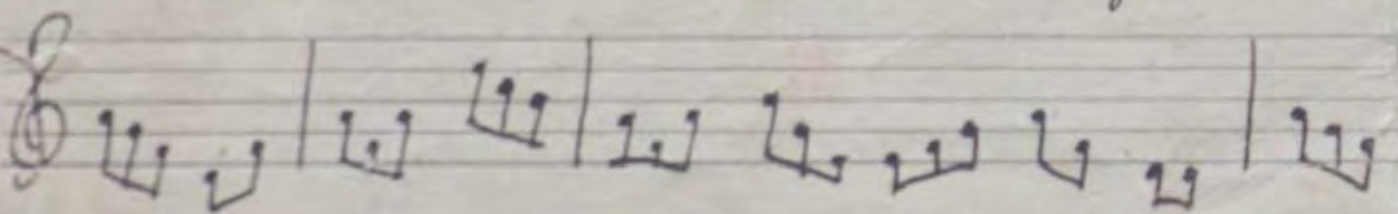
# The Boys of



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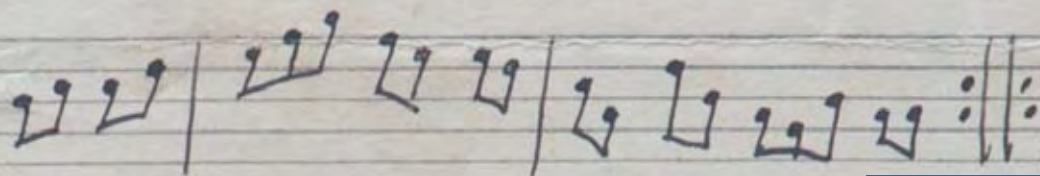
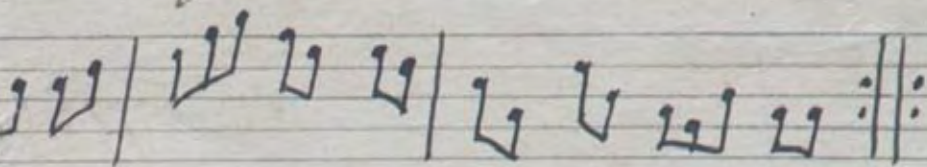


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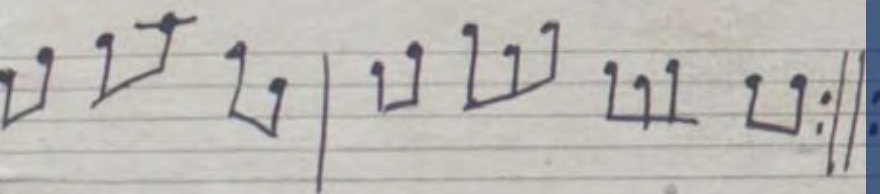
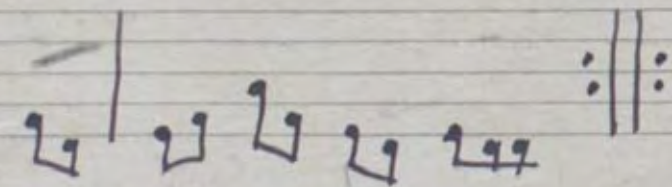




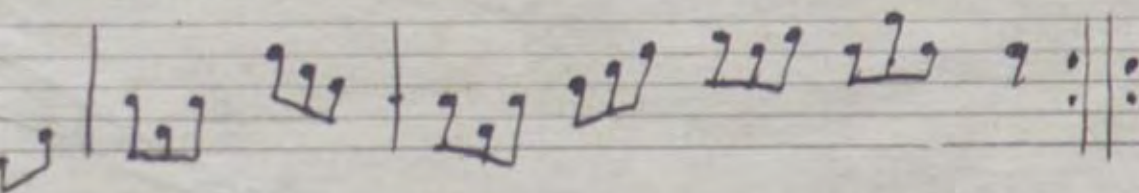
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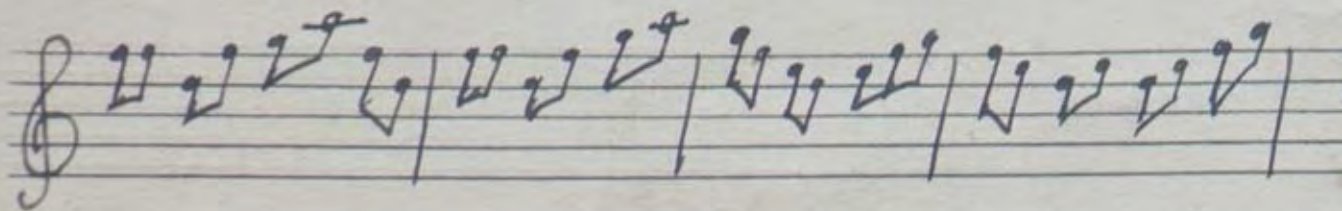
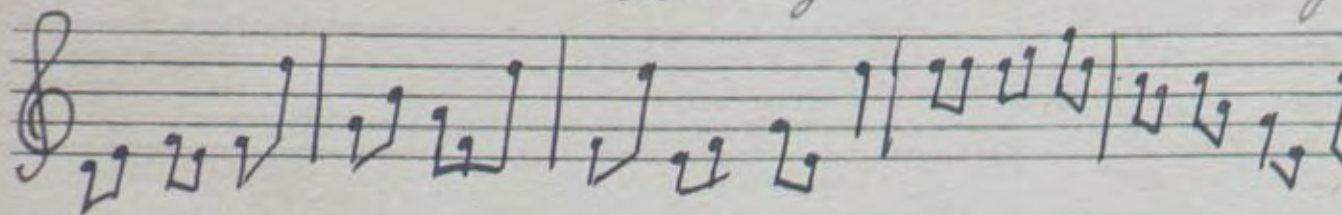
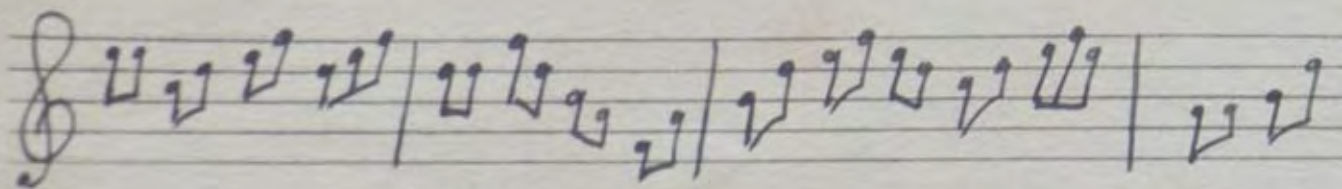
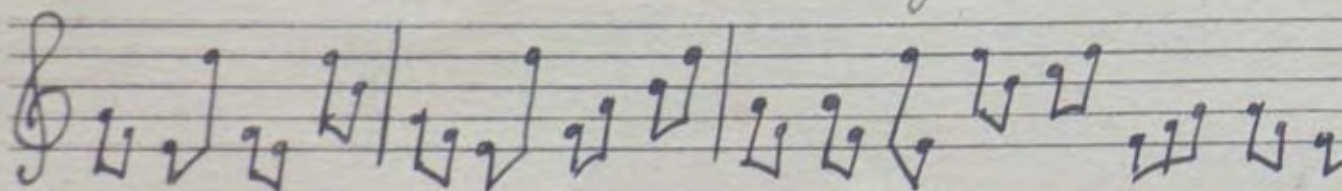
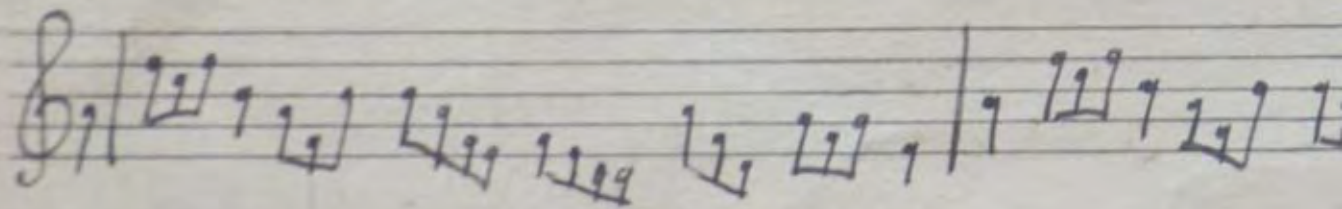
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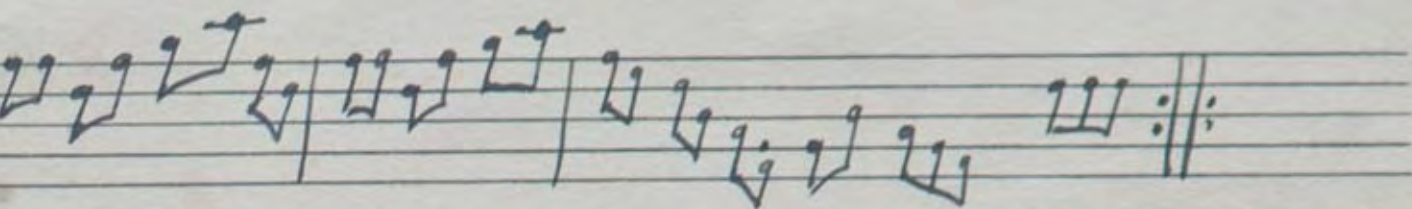
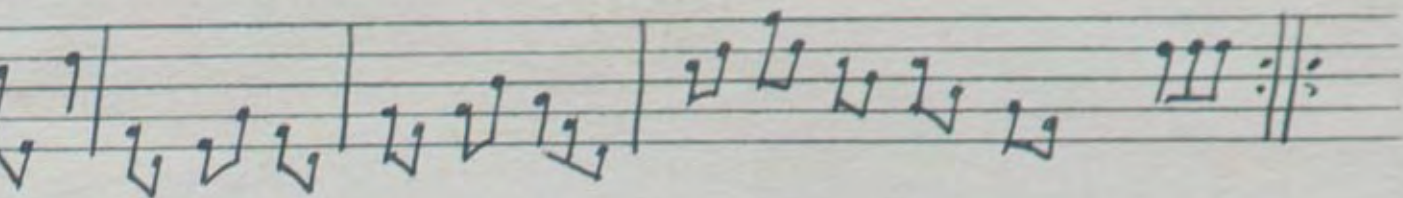


The following pages of traditional fife tunes are taken from original manuscripts dating over 100 years old. The manuscripts belonged to a Hugh McKeen, latterly from Larne, although it is believed he was originally from the Craigs area near Cullybackey, in the mid Antrim heartland of fife and Lambeg drumming. Included are only a few tunes from an extensive repertoire of Scottish, Irish and traditional Orange melodies. Many of these tunes are still being played by fife and drumming groups today. These scores are written in a very basic form of musical notation, with no time signatures, key signatures or real indication of note duration.

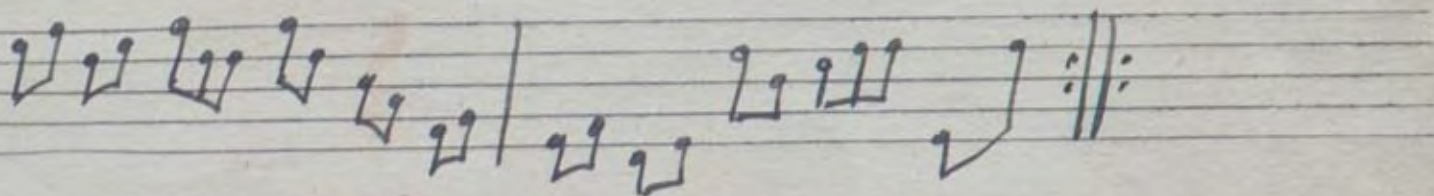
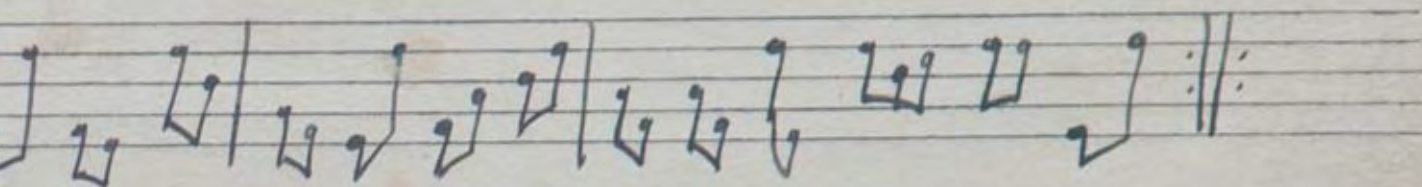
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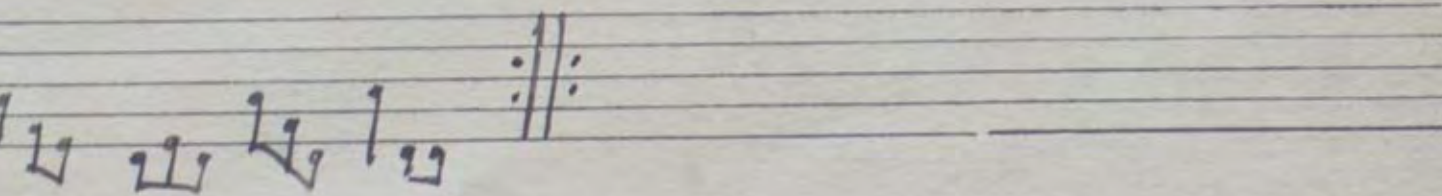
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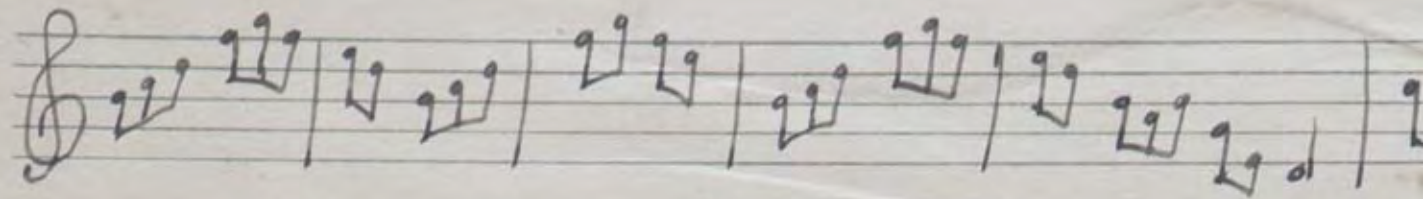
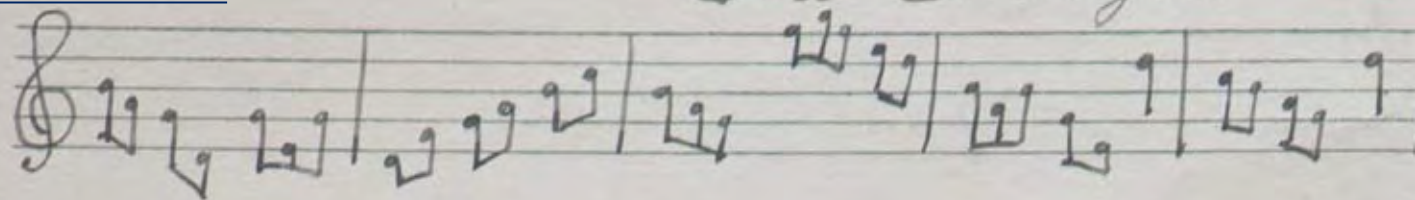
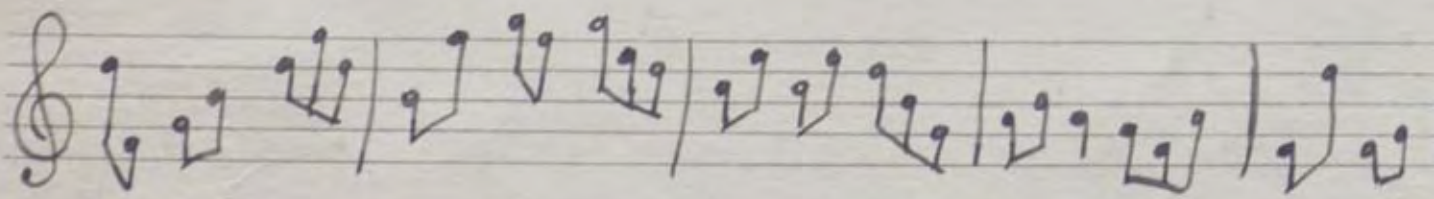
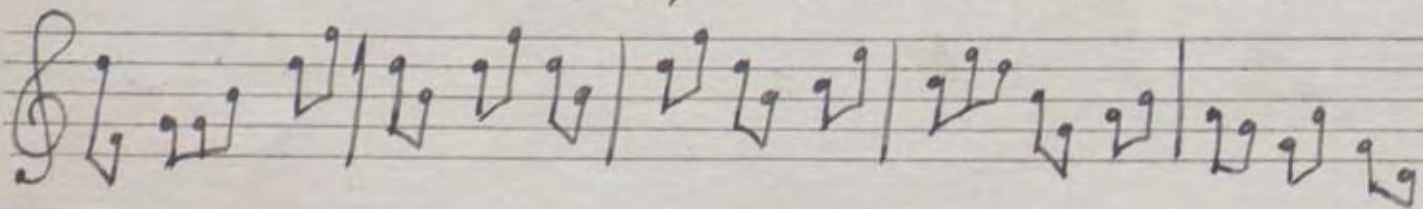
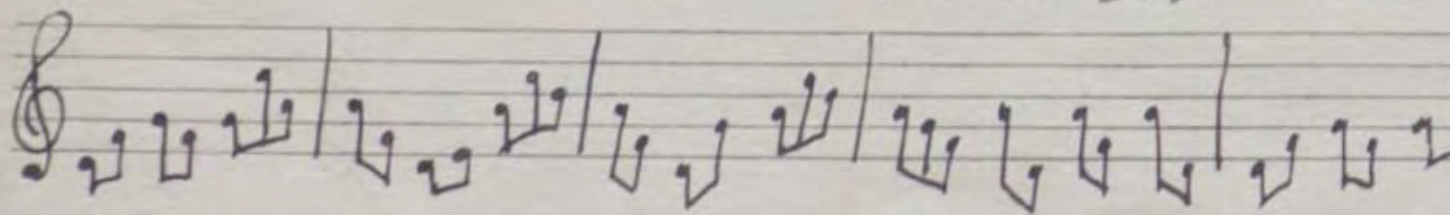


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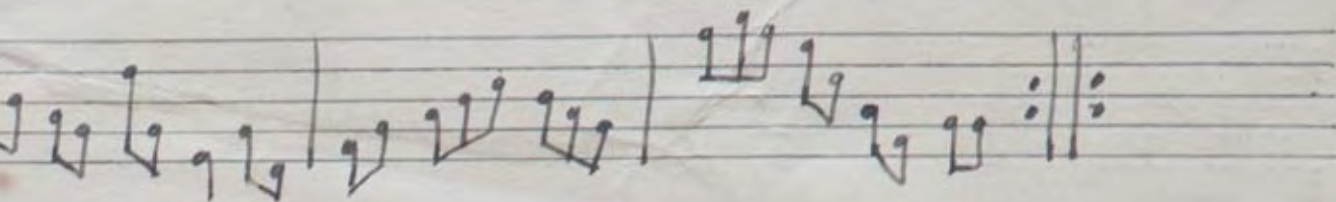
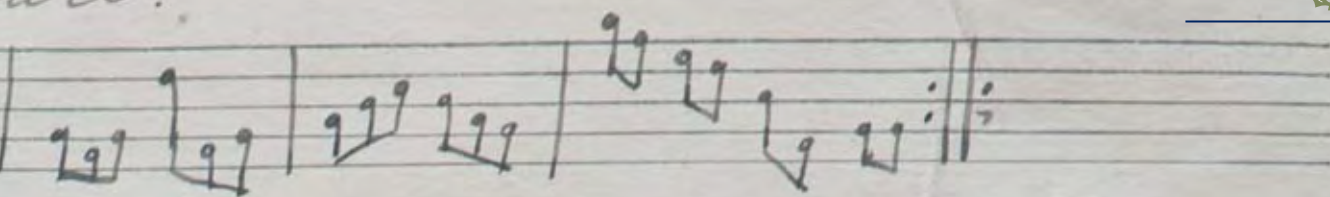
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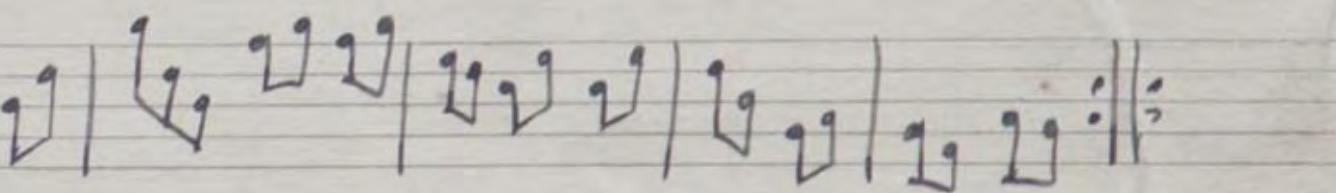
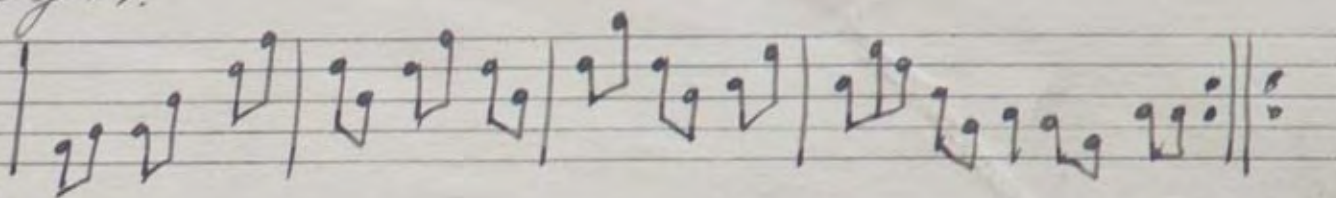
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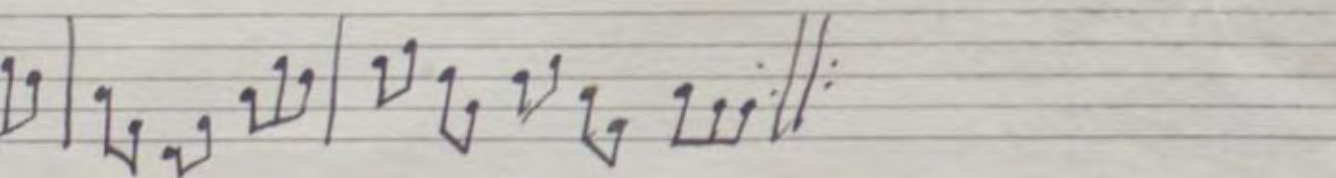
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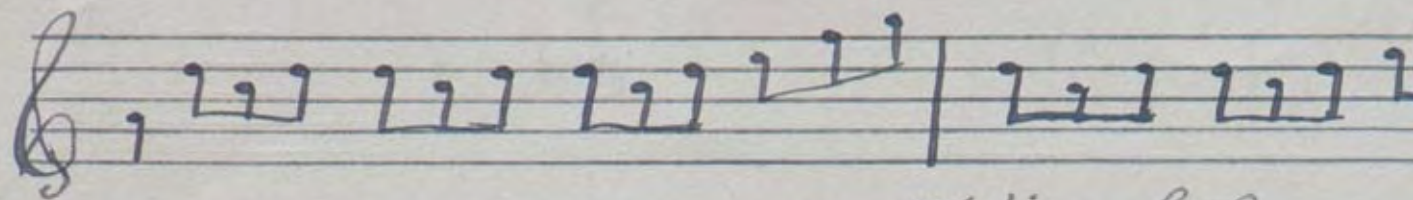
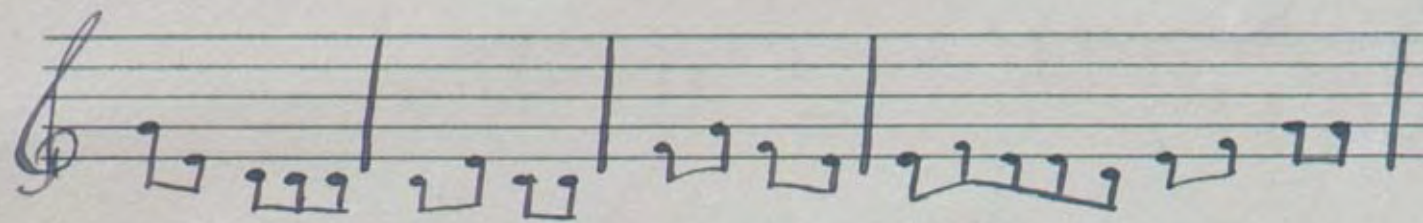


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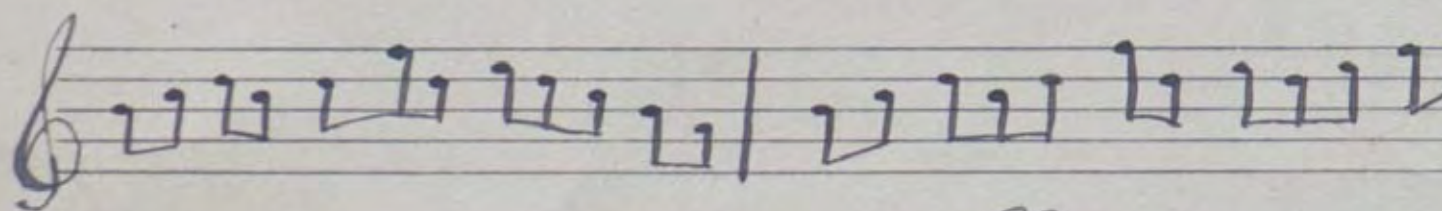
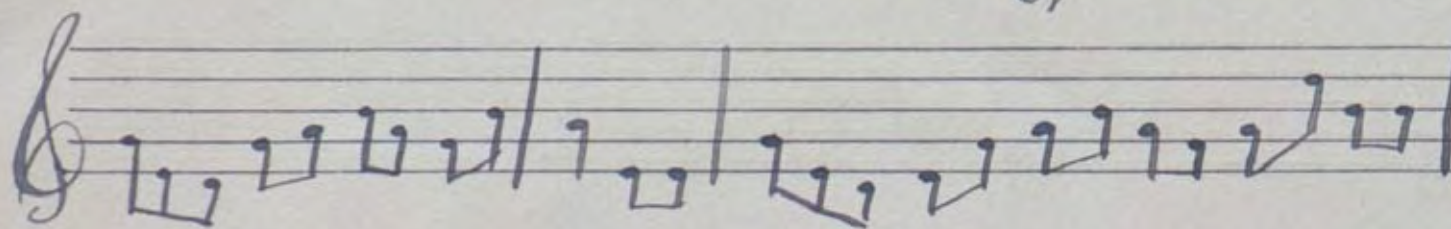




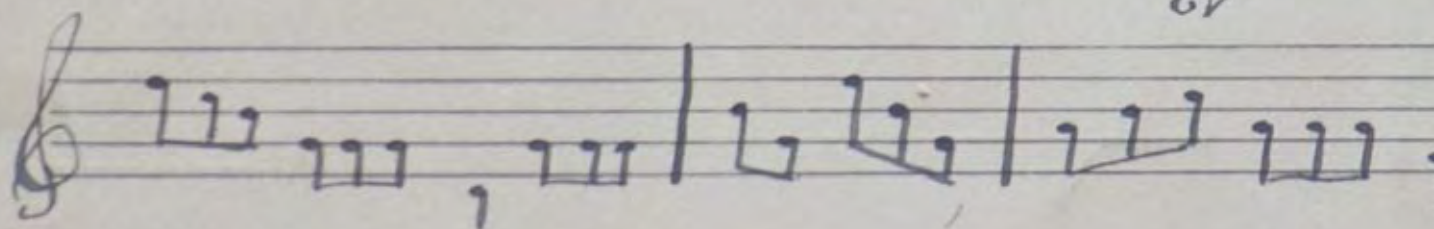
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Highland

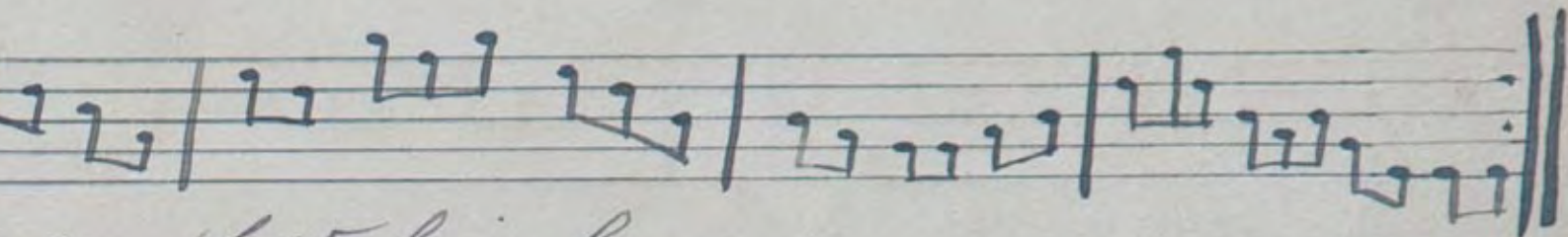
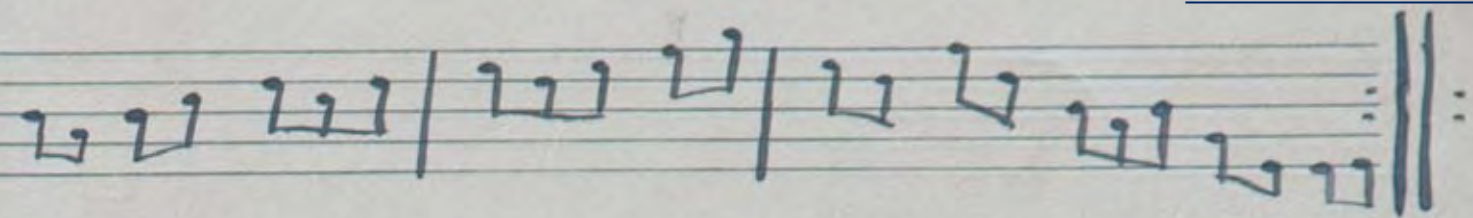


Orange &

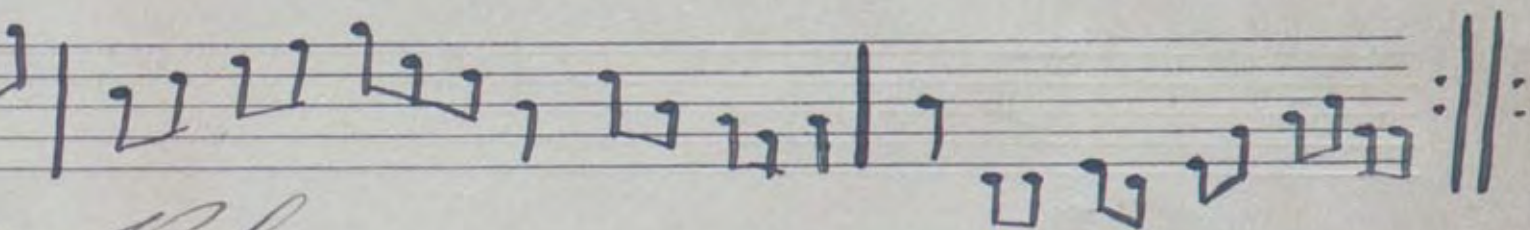
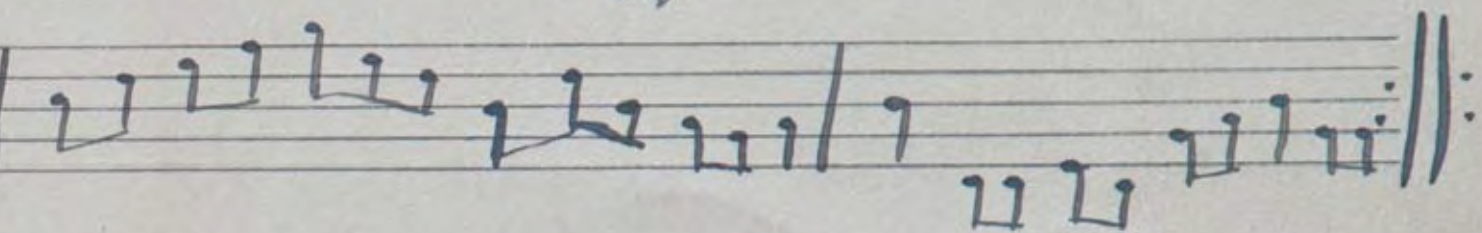




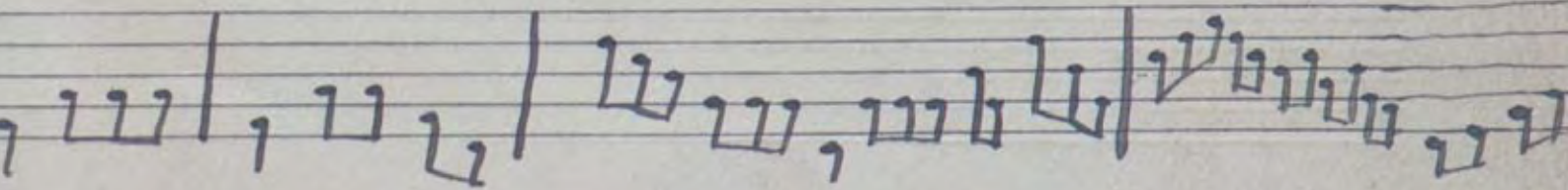
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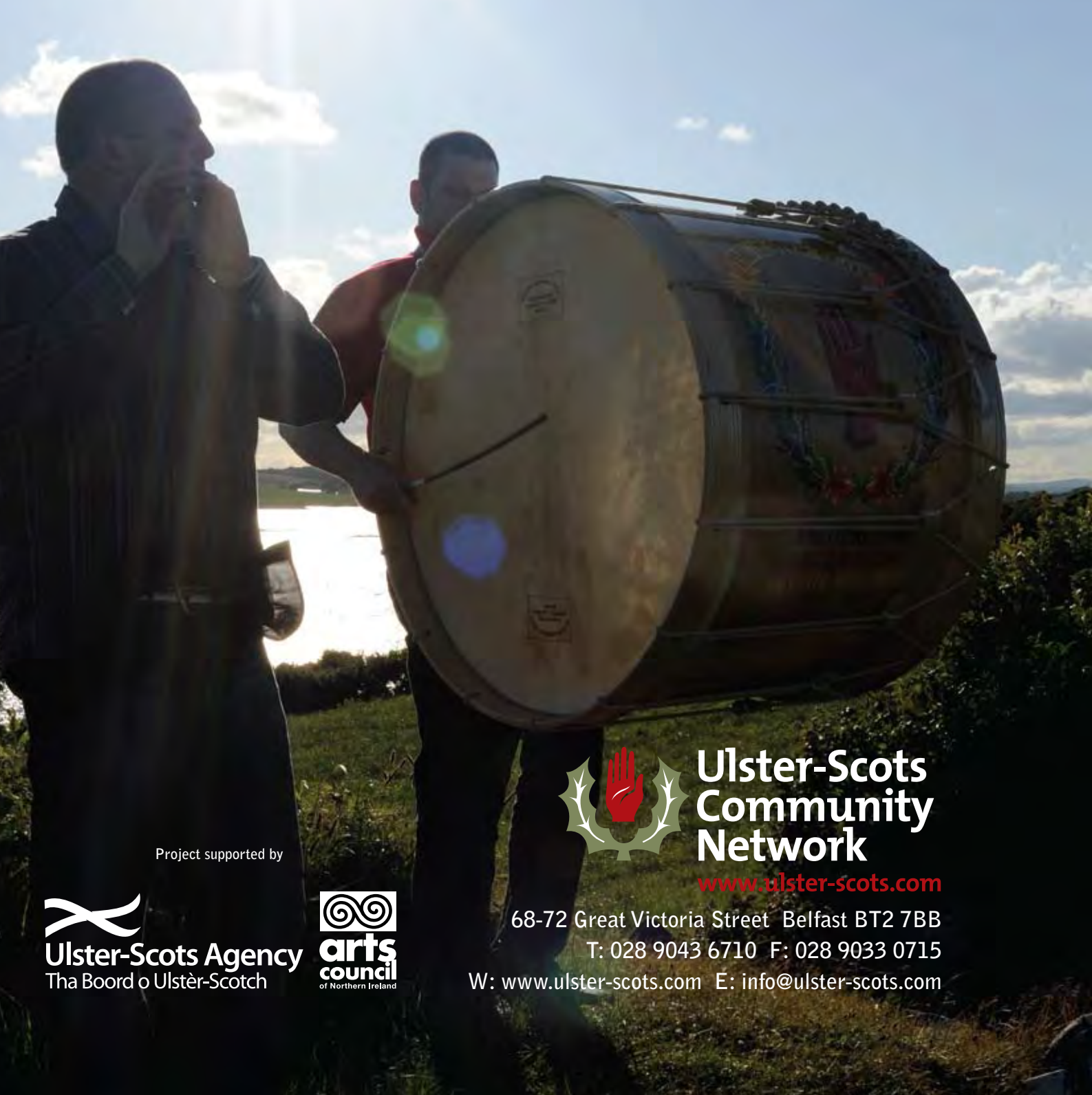


a Whiskey.



Blue.





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