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SHINTY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY EDINBURGH AND  
A PAINTING OF DUDDINGSTON LOCH BY  
CHARLES ALTAMONT DOYLE

JOHN BURNETT

SHINTY IN LOWLAND SCOTLAND

IT IS WELL KNOWN that shinty – the Gaelic *Icamanachd* – was played all over Scotland down to the seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> In the middle of the century the richest sources of evidence are the minutes of various Kirk Sessions among the frequent censures of sports and games on the Sabbath, for example in Fife at Markinch in 1633, and in East Lothian at North Berwick in 1671.<sup>2</sup> There is no reason to doubt that it was played in Edinburgh, though explicit evidence is lacking – as with so many of the leisure activities of the common people. Shinty was one of the few traditional sports which was played both in the countryside and in towns, in the fields and the streets. However, it is often regarded as having retreated to the *Gàidhealtachd* by the nineteenth century, if not earlier.<sup>3</sup> It was re-introduced to the Lowlands from the Highlands by people who were encouraged or forced to move south: it was Highlanders in exile who played in the matches which were held in Edinburgh and Glasgow from the 1860s onwards.

As in the *Gàidhealtachd*, shinty was played in Lowland Scotland particularly on significant days in mid winter. An example close to Edinburgh comes from Aberlady in East Lothian: there the chief winter holiday in the first decade of the nineteenth century was Auld Hansel Monday, i.e. Hansel Monday by the Julian calendar. Quoiting and shooting took place in the morning, and in the afternoon foot races and putting the weight. Finally, there was a shinty match, which was later replaced by golf.<sup>4</sup> This evidence, along with similar references from the west of

Scotland, suggests that for adults at least the most common day for shinty was the main winter holiday – Yule, New Year's Day, Hansel Monday or Auld Hansel Monday.

In the Highlands it was common for these matches to be played on ice, typically on low ground on which standing water had frozen, and some players wore skates. This Scots practice is a possible component in the creation of ice hockey in Canada in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. The most exhaustive study of the origin of the sport unfortunately does not consider in detail the possibility of a significant Scots role.<sup>5</sup> In an early set of rules the name 'shinny on our side' was used for the game,<sup>6</sup> so perhaps the Scots did contribute something; or was shinty playing simply assimilated into the new sport?

Jameson's *Dictionary of the Scottish Language* says the word shinty was used all over Scotland in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, and we may infer that the game was similarly omnipresent.<sup>7</sup> Shinty was also played in parts of England. The *English Dialect Dictionary (EDD)* records *shinham* in the north of England, *shinnins* and *shinnop* in Yorkshire, and *shinny* and *shinty* in the north of England generally, and as far south as Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire and Gloucestershire.<sup>8</sup> The *EDD* mentions *shinty* being played in Workington in Cumberland as late as 1888, when two boys were fined for playing the game in the street and a third 'was let off, having been well thrashed by his parent'.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the *EDD* records *shinnop*, as well as meaning the ball-and-stick game, as 'to trip any one up on the ice' in the East Riding of Yorkshire. This

may contain a memory of the game being played there on ice – which might have been possible quite often during the ‘little ice age’ of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

The word *shinty* was used to mean the stick with which the game was played as well as the game itself. Thus when the famous golfer and clubmaker ‘Old’ Willie Park (1834–1903) said that he learned his golf with a shinty at Musselburgh, he was indicating the presence of the game of *shinty* there in the 1840s.<sup>10</sup>

#### SHINTY IN EDINBURGH

There is extensive evidence that shinty was still widely played in Lowland Scotland in the first half of the nineteenth century, and that it died out only after 1850.<sup>11</sup> Although a historian has said that shinty at Hallow Fair ceased about 1800, the point appears to be that the great traditional festival was in decline, not that shinty was vanishing.<sup>12</sup> With regard to Edinburgh in particular, there is both verbal and visual evidence. For example, in 1816 members of the Burgess Golfing Society complained that their play on Bruntsfield Links was being made hazardous by shinty players,<sup>13</sup> and five years later an anonymous writer describing children’s games in Edinburgh explained that:<sup>14</sup>

the shinty, or *hummy*, is played by a set of boys in two divisions, who attempt, as best they can, to drive with curved sticks, a ball, or what is more common, part of the vertebral bone of a sheep, in opposite directions. When the object driven along reaches the appointed place in either termination, the cry of *hail!* stops the game, till it is knocked off anew by the boy who was so fortunate as to drive it past the *gog*.

James Ballantine (1808–77), the stained-glass painter, novelist and poet, was born in Edinburgh and remembered in verse his childhood around 1820. He referred to:<sup>15</sup>

The rough snaw-ba’ bickers, the twa-fisted rows,  
The hard shinty peltings, an’ bruised bluidy pows;  
The big fouter’s couter, the wee loon’s retort;  
I see them whiles yet in the Auld West Port.

Robert Chambers recorded shinty in Edinburgh in 1825.<sup>16</sup> In the same decade a match at *camack* – the word is a Scots form of *camanachd* – was recorded in Edinburgh on New Year’s Day.<sup>17</sup> Ballantine, in a song in which he recommended golf on Bruntsfield Links, and which probably refers to the 1840s, advised:<sup>18</sup>

Don’t bounce about your ‘dogs of war’  
Nor at our *shinties* scoff, boys;  
But learn our motto, ‘Sure and Far’,  
Then come and play at golf, boys.

There is also visual evidence for shinty in Edinburgh: David Octavius Hill’s painting ‘A View of Edinburgh from the Castle Rock’ (c.1860) shows a group of youths playing shinty at the west end of Princes Street Gardens,<sup>19</sup> and another painting of roughly the same date is discussed in the second half of this note.

Forms of shinty survived in the older schools, where the permanence of the institution protected them. At Edinburgh Academy there was the game of *hailes* for the younger boys: the older pupils abandoned it around 1880. An unsuccessful attempt to revive it was made in 1890 and a successful one in 1924. This game, however, though similar to shinty and almost certainly derived from it, was distinct from it.<sup>20</sup> Shinty had also been played at the High School, where Robert Christison was a pupil in the second decade of the century. He enjoyed ‘shinty [hockey], clacken, football, races, leaping, wrestling, tops, peeries [peg-tops], bools [marbles], and papes [cherry-stones], each in its season’.<sup>21</sup> The interpretations in parentheses are Christison’s, and for ‘clacken’ he supplied a footnote: ‘A light wooden

single-handed bat, with small, round flat head, used nowadays for a kind of shinty and a game similar to "fives". Thus the clacken was both the bat and one of the two games played with it. The feature which distinguished hailes from shinty was the use of the short bat rather than the longer caman.

Lowland shinty was in steep decline by the middle of the nineteenth century and as far as it was still played, was almost exclusively a game for boys. An anonymous writer, probably referring to Edinburgh, complained in 1873:<sup>22</sup>

What has become of shinty, and cat-and-bat, and 'rounders', and heuch-and-yanky, and 'handy' and a dozen other exhilarating ball games which once engaged the attention of thousands? They were the delight of our younger days, but no one knows them now. The builder built some of them out – as shinty and rounders; and the policeman extinguished others.

The policeman also had a role in stopping shinty, for the County Police orders for Edinburghshire in 1842 included the following: 'Many complaints having been made of boys playing at "shinty or football" upon the public roads, the Constable is directed to put an immediate stop to it.'<sup>23</sup> As with *bulleting* or *hainching* – still played in Ireland as *road bowling* – the action of the police in suppressing sports which were dangerous to other road users was successful. In Ayrshire the Road Trustees put a stop to *bulleting* and it is likely that there and elsewhere they created pressure to stop shinty.<sup>24</sup> This was certainly the case in Argyllshire.<sup>25</sup>

#### WINTER SPORTS ON DUDDINGSTON LOCH

The National Museums of Scotland recently acquired a large watercolour dated 1876, 'Winter Sports on Duddingston Loch', by Charles Altamont Doyle (1832–93). The painting shows Duddingston Loch

from the south with some three hundred figures on and around the loch. At the right-hand edge is the octagonal curling house which doubled as the Reverend John Thomson's painting studio. The three sports illustrated are skating, curling and shinty. The shinty appears to be an *ad hoc* match of townsmen: significantly, all are adults. Enveloped in the *mêlée* are a minister and his daughters, and one might see this as a deliberate contrast between the forces of order and disorder, of reason and unreason, of visible authority being swamped by the invisible medieval Abbot of Unreason.

Charles Doyle was a member of a well known family of illustrators. Among his brothers were Richard or 'Dicky' Doyle (1824–93), prolific producer of cartoons for *Punch*, and Henry Edward Doyle, Director of the National Gallery of Ireland from 1869. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930), Charles's eldest son, shared his father's enthusiasm for the observation of detail. Charles Doyle lived in Edinburgh from 1849, and was an Assistant Architect in the Office of Works for Scotland from 1849 to 1876. In his spare time he worked as an illustrator, chiefly of fairy books: this side of his work was emphasised in the Victoria & Albert Museum's 1984 exhibition 'Richard Doyle and his Family'.<sup>26</sup> Charles Doyle exhibited at the Royal Scottish Academy between 1862 and 1887, and his illustrated diary has been published.<sup>27</sup> Doyle became an alcoholic and spent most of his later life in mental hospitals. The figure near the right-hand edge of 'Winter Sports on Duddingston Loch' who is drinking whisky straight out of a bottle is Doyle's *alter ego*; he recurs in a watercolour of a summer fair.<sup>28</sup> In the museum at Royal Sunnyside Hospital, Montrose, there is a collection of drawings by Doyle of his fellow patients.

Although one of Doyle's favourite subjects was the fairy world, he appears to have been an accurate



Detail of Charles Altamont Doyle, 'Winter Sports on Duddingston Loch', 1876. (By courtesy of the Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland; T.1995.23.)

recorder when his subject was more tangible, and many of the details of the skating in this picture correspond to the known facts about the Edinburgh Skating Club.<sup>29</sup> The watercolour shows some of the markers which the Club placed on the ice to guide their evolutions, and those shown are identical to the ones preserved in the National Museums of Scotland.<sup>30</sup> Other aspects of the skating are also accurate: the members' custom of wearing top hats on the Loch, the presence of policemen who were responsible for life saving, the payment to a man for sweeping snow from the ice, the Club tent erected by the Club's Officer, who placed warning boards on dangerous parts of the ice and who was supposed to help with life saving – but was also allowed to supplement his income by selling spirits. The curling scenes which Doyle drew for various books are accurate in detail though sometimes whimsical in spirit.<sup>31</sup>

The detail of 'Winter Sports on Duddingston Loch' is remarkably similar to a description of sports on the Loch in the *Scotsman* for 11 January 1864. December 1863 had been very mild: on the last day of the month a strawberry was picked in a garden in Dick Place.<sup>32</sup> On New Year's Day an intense and prolonged frost began. By 8 January the daytime temperature was no more than 15°F (–9.5°C) in the Botanic Gardens and skaters had been in action for several days on St Margaret's Loch and on the pond at the Royal Patent Gymnasium at Canonmills. Curlers had been playing on Dunsapie Loch. Duddingston Loch, being larger and deeper, did not completely freeze until Saturday 9 January. The *Scotsman* estimated that on that afternoon there were 6000 people on the Loch, and that since the crowd was constantly changing a total of 12,000 to 15,000 had been there in the course of the day. The scene on the road to the Loch was exactly as in Doyle's painting:<sup>33</sup>

The road towards midday presented an appearance of bustle and activity such as in ordinary circumstances is seldom seen in the greatest thoroughfares of the city. Carriages, coaches, cabs, gigs

and other conveyances swelled the living tide that rolled eastwards by Arthur's Seat ... and in parts of the route the crowd of people and vehicles was so great as to somewhat impede the progress of pedestrians.

Meanwhile, on the Loch itself,

skilled and veteran skaters performed mystic evolutions with an ease and grace that made them conspicuous among the motley thousands who sought recreation ... Highest up towards the eastern end of the loch eager, high-spirited curlers carried on their invigorating game in the presence of hundreds of amused spectators, jest and laugh mingling with the rumbling music of the stones ... Occasionally dense crowds of boys pursuing the flying ball, swept whirlwind-fashion over different parts of the ice, now, as seen from the distance, settling into a confused and undistinguishable mass, and then, breaking up, scattering into long straggling files, and carrying humorous terror into the hearts of nervous and undisciplined skaters who, without warning, happened to be enveloped in and carried away with the rushing tide.

In an adjacent column an anonymous correspondent complained, under the heading 'Shinty on the Ice', that 'much inconvenience and not a few disagreeable tumbles were caused by a crowd of rude and unmannerly lads ... rushing about in a reckless manner, upsetting every one who happened to get in their way'.

The *Scotsman* report makes it clear that Doyle's painting is an entirely credible image. Indeed, the correspondence between the two is such that one is forced to speculate whether the picture might be based on the scene on that day in 1864. Both the costume and the carriages in the background suggest a date ten years or so before Doyle's signature, and it is possible that such a large picture, painted by a man with full-time employment and commissions for illustrating books, would take some years to complete.<sup>34</sup> A search through the *Scotsman* for the winters between 1864 and 1876 has not revealed another occasion when so many people were on the Loch – though it is highly likely that this indicates an

absence of newspaper reporters rather than an absence of action. The conjecture remains no more than a conjecture.

How does the painting relate to the history of shinty? Between 1866 and 1869 the Edinburgh Highland Society organised a shinty match on the parade ground in Queen's Park, immediately east of the Palace of Holyroodhouse. All the players wore the kilt. This was by no means an event exclusively for Highlanders living in Edinburgh, for in its first year players travelled from Speyside on the newly opened Highland Railway.<sup>35</sup> The Edinburgh Camanachd Club was formed in the winter of 1869–70 and it organised matches from 1870 onwards.<sup>36</sup> Their membership included public figures such as Macleod of Morar and Sheriff Alexander Nicholson, and they were a well organised club who played in uniform, normally in the kilt.<sup>37</sup> Doyle shows a motley collection of players in their everyday clothes – indeed, most do not seem to have camans, but walking sticks and even umbrellas: he has not painted one of the formally organised matches. Finally, the Highland Society and the Camanachd Club played on dry land.

Nevertheless, other references confirm what Doyle saw: in 1865 the Edinburgh Skating Club noted the presence of shinty players on the Loch, some of them wearing the kilt,<sup>38</sup> and on New Year's Day 1869 the Reverend David Aitken saw 'kilted Highlanders' playing shinty on Duddingston Loch.<sup>39</sup> Although none of Doyle's figures wears the kilt, a

few have Glengarry bonnets and appear to be Highlanders of modest means who would not have owned full Highland dress. Most of the players are in simple Lowland dress and are the common people of Edinburgh. On the basis of the evidence available, we can conclude that Doyle painted shinty as it had been played for centuries in Edinburgh, with an infusion of Highland blood.

Before we leave Doyle's picture, we must also be aware that he may not have been solely responsible for it. There is an unsigned pen-and-ink sketch in a private collection which shows sports on Duddingston Loch – it includes the unmistakable octagonal curling house. In general layout it resembles Charles Doyle's watercolour, but its style seems to be closer to that of his brother Richard.

#### CONCLUSION

There was a limited survival of shinty in Edinburgh until the second half of the nineteenth century, and this was typical of Lowland Scotland. Its strength, however, remained in certain parts of the Highlands. The established story, that from about 1870 it was reintroduced to the Lowlands, particularly the Glasgow area, by people who had been drawn south in search of employment, is without doubt close to the truth. For all the liveliness of Charles Doyle's painting it shows a scene near the end of the Lowland tradition of playing shinty.

## SHINTY ON DUDDINGSTON LOCH

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

- I am grateful to Iseabail MacLeod, Sheriff David B. Smith and particularly Hugh Dan MacLennan for their advice; Sheriff Smith also directed the National Museums' attention to the painting when it was on the market in 1995.
- 1 Roger Hutchinson, *Camanachd! The Story of Shinty* (Edinburgh 1989), p. 36.
  - 2 John Earnest Simpkins, *Examples of Printed Folk-Lore Concerning Fife* (London 1914), pp. 182–183; Hugh Dan MacLennan, *Not an Orchid ...* (North Kessock 1995), p. 50.
  - 3 For example, Hutchinson, *Camanachd!*, p. 102.
  - 4 J. P. Reid, *The Skipper's Daughter: An East Lothian Tale of the Smuggling Days* (Haddington c.1910), pp. 35–38: I am indebted to David Trevarthen for this reference.
  - 5 Garth Vaughan, *The Puck stops Here* (Frederickton 1986), pp. 201–206.
  - 6 Hutchinson, *Camanachd!*, p. 99.
  - 7 John Jamieson, *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language*, 2 vols (Edinburgh 1825).
  - 8 Joseph Wright (ed.), *The English Dialect Dictionary*, 6 vols (London 1898–1905).
  - 9 *Carlisle Patriot*, 20 January 1888.
  - 10 For this reference I am grateful to David Hamilton who allowed me to read proofs of his book *Golf: Scotland's Game*, due to be published in 1998.
  - 11 Evidence from the Borders, Galloway and Glasgow will be set out in a forthcoming book by the present author, *Riot, Revelry and Rout: Traditional Sport in Lowland Scotland before 1850*.
  - 12 Robert MacGregor, *Pastimes and Players* (London 1881), p. 76. Halloween was the Christian All Saints Day and the Gaelic *Samhuinn*, 1 November.
  - 13 MacLennan, *Not an Orchid*, p. 69.
  - 14 *Blackwood's Magazine*, August 1821, p. 36. The word *hummy* more usually means a cry at shinty meaning 'keep to your own side'. The *gog* was the point which served as the goal: the same word was used for the tee in curling and quoits, and it is also recorded in the form *cogy* or *coggie* as the tee which was used when starting or restarting a shinty match: Robert Craig MacLagan, *The Games and Diversions of Argyleshire* (London 1901), pp. 29, 31.
  - 15 James Ballantine, *The Gaberlunzie's Wallet* (Edinburgh 1843), p. 43. There is a brief notice of Ballantine in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. A *fouter* is a tedious and exasperating person: the related verb meaning to work in a careless fashion – *fouterin about* – is more familiar.
  - 16 Robert Chambers, *Traditions of Edinburgh*, 2 vols (Edinburgh 1825), II, p. 78.
  - 17 J. H. A. Macdonald, *Life Jottings of an Old Edinburgh Citizen* (London 1915), p. 56, quoting *Edinburgh Evening Courant*, 22 January 1821.
  - 18 James Ballantine, 'A Golfing Song', quoted by Robert Clark, *Golf: A Royal and Ancient Game* (Edinburgh 1875), pp. 218–221, at p. 218.
  - 19 Illustrated in: City of Edinburgh Museums & Galleries, *A Picture of Edinburgh: A Celebration of the City and its Countryside* (Edinburgh 1995), p. 51.
  - 20 Magnus Magnusson, *The Clacken and the Slate: The Story of Edinburgh Academy 1824–1974* (London 1974), pp. 327–330. See also Macdonald, *Life Jottings*, pp. 152–153.
  - 21 *The Life of Sir Robert Christison, Bart.*, 2 vols (Edinburgh 1885–86) I, p. 31.
  - 22 Anonymous letter, *Percival King's Scottish Cricketers' Annual and Guide*, 3 (1872–73), pp. 33–34. *Cat-and-bat* was an ancestor of cricket. *Heuch-and-yanky* has not been identified: it has escaped the *Scottish National Dictionary*.
  - 23 Quoted by Hugh Dan MacLennan, *Shinty!* (Nairn [1993]), p. 31.
  - 24 I am grateful to David McClure for information on the Ayrshire Road Trustees.
  - 25 MacLennan, *Not an Orchid*, p. 113.
  - 26 Victoria and Albert Museum, *Richard Doyle and his Family* (London 1984), pp. 58–60.
  - 27 Malcolm Baker, *The Doyle Diary* (New York 1978).
  - 28 In the National Gallery of Ireland.
  - 29 M. Elliot, 'The Edinburgh Skating Club 1778–1966', *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club (BOEC)*, 33 (1971), pp. 96–136.
  - 30 National Museums of Scotland, H.NS 176–80.
  - 31 For example, in *The Channel-Stane, or Sweepings frae the Links*, 3rd series (Edinburgh 1884); James Taylor, *Curling: The Ancient Scottish Game* (Edinburgh 1884); and the definitive work, John Kerr, *The History of Curling* (Edinburgh 1890). There are much smaller watercolours by Doyle of curling on Duddingston Loch in a private collection and in Edinburgh City Museums: see D. B. Smith, *Curling: An Illustrated History* (Edinburgh 1981), p. 97.
  - 32 *Scotsman*, 1 January 1864.
  - 33 *Scotsman*, 11 January 1864.
  - 34 I thank Naomi Tarrant and Alastair Dodds, both of the National Museums of Scotland, for their comments.
  - 35 *Scotsman*, 2 January 1866.
  - 36 Hutchinson, *Camanachd!*, p. 104.
  - 37 Hutchinson, *Camanachd!*, pp. 104–106; MacLennan, *Shinty!*, p. 37.
  - 38 Elliot, 'Edinburgh Skating Club', p. 96.
  - 39 R. G. Heddle, 'Extracts from the Diary of the Rev. David Aitken, D.D., 1864–1875.' *BOEC*, 33 (1971), pp. 61–95, p. 75.