



## **NOTING THE TRADITION**

### **An Oral History Project from the National Piping Centre**



Supported by  
**The National Lottery**<sup>®</sup>  
through the Heritage Lottery Fund



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**Interviewer                    Finlay MacDonald, Iain MacDonald**

**Date of Interview            20<sup>th</sup> November 2012**

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**This is Finlay MacDonald and Iain MacDonald with George McIlwham on Tuesday 20 November 2012, as part of the oral history project.**

**Finlay MacDonald** So I guess a good way to start George, would be to just ask you about your early career in music and how you got started.

George McIlwham Right Finlay, it was away back as you can well imagine. My uncle, fortunately for me, he was a piper, he was with HLI and then the Cameronians and he finished up at the end of the First World War. I don't know if the name MacPhedran means much to you.

**Finlay MacDonald** Yes.

George McIlwham But there was an old MacPhedran who once used to work in the, I think it was Henderson's bagpipe shop in Renfrew Street. He told me about my uncle and fortunately my cousin and myself were able to learn the rudiments of the chanter, the practice chanter as it were, at that time. Then later on, I went to a piper called Donald MacLean but it wasn't Donald MacLean of Lewis it was Donald MacLean of the Lovat Scouts. Donald used to give me my lessons until one day I bumped into Pipe Major Robert Reid. I was very anxious to pal up with him because he was a master piper. He had a bagpipe shop which was off George Square, I think it was in George Street, it was just up on the left-hand side, and I used to go up there and sit with him in the bagpipe shop and we did all sorts of stuff, and of course he was a master piobaireachd player. He won the open clasp for the open piobaireachd in Inverness in nineteen forty-seven.

Nineteen forty-seven was a brilliant year in many ways because that was the year that the first World Pipe Band Championship was instituted. And not only that, that was the year that Bobby Reid had

won the Inverness, the Open Piobaireachd at Inverness, and it was the year of the first Edinburgh Festival, 1947.

**Finlay MacDonald** So it was quite a year then wasn't it?

George McIlwham It was quite a year indeed, because at that time I was with the national orchestra and that was 1947, that's when I got the job. We were very heavily involved in the 1947 Edinburgh Festival. We were doing the Verdi's MacBeth and Mozart's Marriage of Figaro. We worked in Edinburgh in the Usher Hall and in the King's Theatre for that.

**Finlay MacDonald** Am I right in saying, did you learn piping before any of your flute or piccolo playing or did it happen simultaneously?

George McIlwham Well they both sort of developed at the same time. I was at Hutchie School, it was a boys' school in those days, and it so happened that an old pupil had left an old flute for somebody to take up, and I was absolutely mad keen on the flute at that time.

**Finlay MacDonald** Yeah.

George McIlwham So that's how I got a really good a start onto flute playing. Although my cousin and myself we had played little fifes and things like that, along with our practice chanter lessons. The fingerings were different but it gave us a good idea as to what we had to do in order to adapt to both of these instruments, the flute and the bagpipe.

**Iain MacDonald** Did you receive a lot of encouragement at school in your playing of the flute?

George McIlwham I did, I received a great deal of encouragement and I was very keen on the orchestra. It wasn't on the curriculum, it was every Friday afternoon that we had an orchestral rehearsal, and I

was there with an old, it so happened that this flute that I was given was an old eight keyed flute, and to play anything on it was gey near impossible. But I managed to play on it alright and we did some classical pieces, Schubert and other pieces like the Overture of the Bohemian Girls, which was very, very difficult for me in those days, and other pieces as well. But that gave me a start and eventually I went to the Academy of Music and studied with Professor Waller who was the professor of the flute at that time the old Scottish National Academy of Music. That's what it was called then. Eventually, Ernest Bullock who was the principal, he was knighted and it became the Royal Scottish National Academy of Music. And now it evolved into the Royal Scottish National Music and Drama.

**Finlay MacDonald**    **Yeah that's right.**

George McIlwham    But now it's called The Conservatoire of Scotland which gives it a rather high falutin' name doesn't it?  
[Laughter].

So that was 1947 that we were talking about Finlay, and that's when Pipe Major Robert Reid, now I must tell you about this. As it happened, I joined the BBC Scottish in 1945, no 1954. I joined the orchestra then and the principal conductor was Iain White. Now Iain White had written a ballet called Donald of the Burthens, and he asked the orchestra: "Is there anyone in the orchestra that plays the bagpipe?" I kept quiet as you could well imagine, but anyway, he found out that I was a piper and he asked if I would do this and I said. "Well I'm studying with Pipe Major Robert Reid". So he asked me to phone him up and ask him if he would come in and play the bagpipe part of Donald of the Burthens. At the end of that section of the ballet, it features the bagpipe playing The Reel of Tulloch, which seemed to always be associated with the devil, because he called that section of the ballet The Devil's Finale, and right at the end of it, the bagpipe comes in with The Reel of Tulloch.

**Finlay MacDonald**    **So did you play that or did Robert Reid play it at that time?**

George McIlwham Well, that's the interesting thing. When they asked me to phone Robert Reid, I asked Robert if he would be good enough to come into the BBC and we could have a meeting with Iain White with regard to the ballet Donald of the Burthens. Robert came into the BBC and he said he wouldn't change the pitch of his instrument, but I had an instrument which I was able to tune further down to A, to concert pitch A, which Robert said he would use. That's how we actually did it and Robert played a simple version. I wrote something about it Finlay. I wonder if I could read this to you.

**Finlay MacDonald Absolutely.**

George McIlwham It's very interesting considering the fact that this was the first piece that ever featured the bagpipe with a symphony orchestra.

**Finlay MacDonald Okay.**

George McIlwham It had been performed in Covent Garden in London in the fifties. But in 1954 when I joined the orchestra, not long after that, my teacher, Pipe Major Robert Reid came to the orchestra and he played the theme which was Patrick Mòr MacCrimmon's great piobaireachd, The Lament for the Children. Iain White had based the whole ballet on that theme and it was marvellous how it all worked out. But the Reel of Tulloch was the finished scene and it had to be on the bagpipe in A Major, so this was the difficulty. But Robert played the pipes that I had and they fitted in with the orchestra very well, and that's how it worked. All the concerts that we did I had that close association with Robert Reid who was a master piper.

**Finlay MacDonald Oh yeah.**

George McIlwham Yes, indeed he was.

**Iain MacDonald**      **In your early days George, in your piping career, did solo competitions play any part?**

George McIlwham      Well, strangely enough, there was a policeman who lived locally, his name was Hector Cruikshank and he is still with the Milngavie Pipe Band. I think he tutors the youngsters in the band, but the point was, with Hector we used to go to various competitions in the area, the likes of Luss quite a lot. I remember playing some very difficult tunes there and a pipe band came marching round while I was playing. I got a prize for being able to play despite the pipe band being in opposition. [Laughter].

They were amazed because the reel that I played was Pretty Marion which is a very tricky reel. At that time I think it was John D Burgess who had recorded that reel.

**Iain MacDonald**      **Not for the fainthearted.**

George McIlwham      No indeed, he was a brilliant player, John D Burgess. I wrote this little note about Donald of the Burthens in case anybody else was going to play it and in that I'd said: "The bagpipe was introduced at the end of this final section of Iain White's ballet Donald of the Burthens. It's a kind of Scottish version of the Fuast legend. Now the instrument must be tuned to concert pitch A and the tune played is the Reel of Tulloch. A simple version as suggested by Pipe Major Robert Reid should be used in order that the bagpipe will blend with the strings and woodwind but also play the tune. The number of bars required are as follows: A hundred and twenty bars in all, fourteen parts, each part, eight bars plus eight bars coda." Now the coda is along with the trombones and they sort of announce or detail the theme of The Lament for the Children and the bagpipe plays that tune along with them, right to the end. I've got a little note at the foot here saying that: "The final section has been transposed into the key of B Flat to suit the modern high pitch bagpipe, by the conductor, Iain Sutherland".

**Finlay MacDonald**      **Okay.**

George McIlwham     So that was Donald of the Burthens. Pipe Major Reid did quite a number of performances of that before eventually he managed to get it up. I then took over from there, and realised that the instrument had to be tuned properly in order to play exactly in the same pitch as the orchestra. I did that because I was fortunate enough to have an old Henderson chanter which was pretty flat and Iain White used to say that the bagpipe was much flatter in pitch than it is nowadays you know with the modern instrument. Anyway, I was very fortunate that I had that chanter and I managed to get the drones down to A Major as it were and I managed to do quite a number of performances. I think the best performance of that was recorded and it's held by the Scottish Music Centre, that's in the City Halls Candleriggs in Glasgow.

The interesting thing about that was that it was Sir Alexander Gibson who was conducting the BBC's Scottish Symphony Orchestra and the compare was a chap called Neville Garden, he was an awfully nice fellow. He was a sort of announcer for the BBC at that time and it was in the Caird Hall. If you know the Caird Hall at all, there's a little door at the very back of the stage where you can come in, stand and be ready to play The Reel of Tulloch. I don't think Alex was too keen about it, he thought the bagpiper was bound to come in at the wrong place but anyway I knew exactly what to do, came in and played it and it was absolutely in tune with the orchestra.

And fortunately the Scottish Music Centre recorded it so that it's there if anybody wants to hear it and it's the simple version that Pipe Major Robert Reid had suggested should we play it, it would blend in with the strings and the woodwind and would play in tune.

**Iain MacDonald     Staying with the theme of orchestras in conjunction with bagpipes, you have written your own pieces, for example, Alba.**

George McIlwham     Yes, Alba was probably one of the best. The number of pieces, fourteen in all, that I used to use when I was

travelling about all over the place playing the bagpipes. As you know, Amazing Grace became very, very popular and then I was commissioned to write the bagpipe part for Tam O'Shanter, which was performed in nineteen seventy-three in the City Hall by the Linn Choir. The Linn Choir, Dr Harry Gardiner, had commissioned me to set Tam O'Shanter to music and I realised I'd written a little note about it, but I realised that the bagpipe had to come into it because it was a central point. But also I realised too that to tell the story, it needed somebody like Bill McCue and I got Bill McCue to do the singing in the Scottish folk style with the proper pronunciation of all the Scottish words of which was terrific. We did that performance which was most unusual at the time but it worked extremely well, and you know the poem mentions, "hornpipes, jigs, strathspeys and reels put life and mettle in their heels". I managed to have that order of tunes in the bagpipe part which the choir sing along with, and I used another tune called The Cutty Sark Jig which had been commissioned by Cutty Sark Whisky, and I was able to integrate that with the score and with the choir.

**Finlay MacDonald** Yeah so I guess at that time you must have been, were you the only person doing that, that kind of thing at the time?

George McIlwham I was the only one as far as I know, certainly as far as Donald of the Burthens and Amazing Grace and Tam O'Shanter of course which I'd written myself. I was the only one doing that, and I realised that although I'd joined the orchestra in 1954, I retired in 1986. Robert Crawford was the producer of the piping department in the BBC in Glasgow. He asked me if I would do a series of programmes on the World Pipe Band Championship and as I mentioned, the World Pipe Band Championship started in 1947 and Robert Reid won the open piobaireachd in Inverness in 1947. The first Edinburgh Festival took place in 1947 but once we start talking about pieces like for instance, the Intercontinental Highland Gathering, now that was commissioned by the Royal Scottish Pipe Band Association. They had put up an international competition for a tune, and I was lucky enough to win that with the Intercontinental

Highland Gathering. It's a tune that was written for massed pipe band and massed military band and it was performed in Toronto in Canada in 1972, that was when that took place. They had to have a tune for it and this was all set up for it, because the Scots Guards had their military band there as well, so the whole thing was done properly.

I recently arranged string parts so that it could be done with an orchestra, and it has been done successfully with orchestras and a pipe band playing the tune, but they've got to be careful not to get lost in the middle of it.

**Finlay MacDonald** I remember actually when you came along very kindly when I was teaching at Hutchie.

George McIlwham Oh that's right at Hutchie we did it.

**Finlay MacDonald** And you came along and I played it with the school band and the school orchestra.

George McIlwham Oh they made a lovely job of that. Oh I think they made an excellent job of that and it's written in B Flat and E Flat so that really and truly it's in the pitch of the bagpipe, so that there's no problem with pitch there.

**Iain MacDonald** Can I ask you about your association with the very famous piece, the Orkney Wedding written by Sir Peter Maxwell Davies?

George McIlwham That didn't happen until much later in my career as a solo piper with orchestras and bands, but it sort of added to the repertoire. The other things that I used to play were Alba, The Fanfare Salute, which I must tell you about and Calgacus written by Eddie McGuire we performed that in the City Hall too and it was very successful because I knew exactly where to come in and bagpipe was on a kind of piobaireachd type tune. I arranged it so that it would sound like a piobaireachd in the middle of this battle, although between you and me and the gatepost it was anachronistic because

Calgacus, way back in the Roman times, before the bagpipe was really developed by the MacCrimmons.

After that I'd written this Gaelic waltz fantasy and a fantasia on Mist Covered Mountains of Home the song, although I used the bagpipe version for that and then Mull of Kintyre, Pipers Call, which featured the Jolly Beggarman, the Black Bear, Scotch on the Rocks and Mull of Kintyre which all featured in Top of the Pops. So that was quite interesting. I went to Hilversum with Iain Sutherland and we did that composition there to great success because the orchestra took to it, they thought it was great. Although most pipers wouldn't think very much of these tunes here. And then there was Scotch on the Rocks and the Dark Island and then the one that you were talking about Iain, The Orkney Wedding with Sunrise. Now this is written in A concert pitch and it goes up to D and both of these keys are concert pitch. At the time when I was asked to do it, I thought it was written in the bagpipe key of B Flat and I could just play my own set without having too many worries about pitch, but no, it had to be in A for a start and then up to D for the last section of it.

I spoke to Peter Maxwell Davies up in Orkney at one of the festivals, it was before he had received his knighthood. Strangely enough he never asked me what pitch the pipe should be in, because we know that most bagpipe manuals and most bagpipe books write for the bagpipe in A and D rather than E Flat, B Flat and E Flat. If you're going to think of the keys for the bagpipe, B Flat is Scotland the Brave, E Flat is Amazing Grace. But the Orkney Wedding we had to put get the pipe properly tuned, and now as Iain your father would say Finlay, there has now been a bagpipe manufactured which actually plays an A which makes the job so much easier.

**Finlay MacDonald** So this time I guess from the fifties onwards you were still playing flute?

George McIlwham Yes that's right.

**Finlay MacDonald** You were still playing in the orchestra?

George McIlwham Well fortunately the flute in the orchestra didn't take up too much time. It was a wonderful job to have that because we had a lot of free time and it meant that I could concentrate on the piping with various teachers. Also concentrate on getting all these pieces written, composed and properly arranged for bands and for orchestras. By the way Finlay, all of the scores and manuscripts are held by the Scottish Music Centre which is in the Candleriggs in City Hall.

**Finlay MacDonald Yes.**

**Iain MacDonald Can I ask you about your pipe band experiences? You were of course a well-respected member of the Milngavie Pipe Band.**

George McIlwham Yes that's right Iain. In the Milngavie Pipe Band we had Pipe Major Matthew Kennedy. Now the idea was that we would split between us the job of presenting the band. I was given the job of making sure that all the chanterers were in tune and also I had to be sure that they knew exactly what we were going to do in the way of music. The other thing was that Pipe Major Matt Kennedy was a wonderful chap in that he just allowed me a free hand to do anything I wanted with the pipe band. What I used to do was I used to get the bass drum tuned almost to B Flat so that it emphasised the drones of B Flat. And sometimes the base drummer was not too happy because it slackened off the base drummer quite a bit, and I noticed Shotts and Dykehead they had a special bass drum which played in B Flat. But the point about Milngavie and the Milngavie Pipe Band, I was a founder member of that band and it just so happened that Robert Reid's star pupil Willie Connell was the tutor for that particular pipe band. I spent ten years with the band. We won the championship in Grade 3, then in Grade 2 and then it was a matter of going up to Grade 1 which I decided by that time ten years was quite enough for my wife to have put up with [laughter], being a piping widow.

**Finlay MacDonald** Yes of course. I guess on the tuning of the chanter, I'm quite interested in did you ever have issues with switching between in orchestral music where you look at the pipe scale, the B Flat scale with the flattened seventh I suppose, but with the pipe chanter the kind of have the just intonation scale with tuning you know sometimes the Bs and Ds are not quite what you'd expect from a piano?

George McIlwham The D can be on the sharp side and the top hand can be quite strange at times too. In fact it was Seamus McNeill\* and another professor at Glasgow University who developed the electronic bagpipe. The scale was modelled on one of the older chanter which to us, to a diatonic musician, sounded out of tune. What I used to do with the band was I used, probably for the first time, sticky tape on the holes to make each piper, no matter how bad it sounded, I managed to tune them so that the whole band had the same pitch and that the Ds were not too sharp. In fact they weren't sharp at all, and the top Gs were absolutely flat so that it was a whole tone scale at the top practically. We were always commended for the pitch and the tone of our band which was very encouraging because I thought they would hammer us for not having a traditional sound.

**Finlay MacDonald** That's quite a development I guess in the actual instrument in that using the tape and getting the scale a bit more tempered I guess.

George McIlwham Yes, it's diatonic. For about five hundred years the diatonic scale held sway in classical music and we were all brought up to the diatonic scale so that the bagpipe scale sounded completely way out to most people although Scots pipers were quite used to it. It was quite nice to have that because it struck certain overtones and resultant tones from the drones which we realised, but I took the liberty, even when Willie Connell was tutoring the band, I took the liberty of tuning all the chanter, making them all diatonic so that they sounded beautifully in tune and that helped us enormously to win these prizes.

**Finlay MacDonald** That's incredible that.

**Iain MacDonald** I can remember being at the World Championships I think in nineteen seventy-four when you won, you were first in Grade 3 I believe, and I remember that you were playing a couple of your own tunes. The Vital Spark I believe?

George McIlwham That's right, yes. These tunes were composed especially for pipers who could manage the fingering, and I've got the book there on the table Finlay with three tunes actually. The first one is Jeanie Deans, the second one is Waverley and the third one is The Vital Spark. They took The Vital Spark which was probably the easiest of the tunes but very effective, and they sort of incorporated that into their selection so that we were able to win these championships. The one in Perth, the earlier one, we wanted to enter with the Royal Scottish Pipe Band Association, we wanted to enter it in Grade 4 but they said: "oh no you're barred, you'll have to go into Grade 3." So we did and that first year we won the championship at Perth. And I think Bob Hardie with Muirhead's Band, they won the world championship.

**Iain MacDonald** Yes that's correct.

**Finlay MacDonald** Could I ask you about your years of presenting the piping programme, did it start initially from your coverage of the World Pipe Band Championships and you continued with what was to become Pipeline?

George McIlwham Well when I joined the orchestra in 1954, I was fortunate enough to be associated with Pipe Major Robert Reid at that time studying with him and from that time right up until I retired, I was still playing various pieces that I've mentioned with the orchestra, especially Donald of the Burthens. I played that a lot during that time. But when I came right up to the say 1986 when I left the orchestra, the BBC was Robert Crawford who approached me and said: "look, would you like to present The World Pipe Band Championships?" And I thought "well." So I agreed to do it, but I

wrote all my own scripts for it and in these days the winning bands were the likes of Shotts and Dykehead Caledonia or Muirhead and Sons and I made the monumental blunder of saying after Muirheads had won it for about the fifth or sixth time, I said “nobody will ever manage to win it so many times.” And it wasn’t long after that up came a pipe band and won the World Championship ten times and that was Glasgow Polis with Strathclyde Police and it was Pipe Major Ian McLellan, that was the name wasn’t it?

**Iain MacDonald**      **Yes.**

**Finlay MacDonald**   **Yes.**

George McIlwham      Yes. Oh he was a wonderful player and a marvellous man for taking the band. He used to have the band playing to perfection and we always knew it was the band coming on when we were recording them. We recorded them in various venues all around the country but eventually we settled on Bellahouston Park and then they decided that we would have to leave Bellahouston Park because the ground was subsiding. In other words there were mine workings underneath Bellahouston and the weight of the busses and the pipe bands was too much for it. So from that time on they went to, Glasgow was determined to hold on to the World Pipe Band Championship. They had the good sense to know that that was going to be a tremendous money spinner for Glasgow, and they have it now in Glasgow Green with the Peoples Palace, handy as well for sandwiches.

**Iain MacDonald**      **It’s become a major event now in the city’s calendar.**

George McIlwham      Oh yes in the Glasgow calendar it’s a piping festival.

**Finlay MacDonald**   **Yes.**

George McIlwham    Which really when I think of it was a logical development of the whole thing to become a piping festival. For pipers to learn to play for instance with orchestras, would be a big challenge because they would have to appreciate the pitch of the instrument being an A for most of the concert work and B Flat for modern compositions. In the folk scene which you'll know only too well Finlay, the folk instruments can tune to the bagpipe but in the orchestral situation, the bagpipe has got to tune to the orchestra and that's what makes it so difficult.

**Finlay MacDonald    Yeah. I think actually that's probably down to a lot of the work that you did George, but nowadays most of the major manufacturers are making chanter that are slightly lower pitch to get into concert B Flat because I think they realise that more and more people are looking to do that, and I guess in no small part it's down to people like yourself for pioneering that.**

George McIlwham    When we talk about The Orkney Wedding with Sunrise, really and truly Maxwell Davies should have written that in B Flat and E Flat to make it possible for most pipers to play it. But the first time they did it with the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra, they had terrible problems because the piper was completely out of tune with the band [laughter]. But now it's much easier if bagpipe makers as you know only too well yourself Iain, that they'll make instruments in A Major, concert pitch A which is very flat compared with the modern instrument. Mind you, once you'd got that instrument going at that flat pitch, it was very powerful.

**Finlay MacDonald    Yes, I like the sound when it gets going.**

George McIlwham    I could never blow the chanter now because of the weight. What I did was I had this very old Henderson chanter and also I had a Strathtone\*. You've probably never heard of it but the Strathtone\* Reed had a very long blade and it was quite flat and I had it high up in the tuning seating, the seating you know for the reed in the chanter. That gave me a chance to get down to low A. But it's the old story, temperature affects the pitch of the bagpipe as it does

with every other instrument. The strings go down and woodwind goes up [laughter].

**Finlay MacDonald** I notice that a lot, playing with the fiddlers and things like that, even the Border pipes, even without blowing, as the temperature goes up we go up, but as you say there's things come down in pitch with the heat.

George McIlwham I remember doing it in a place called Grenada in Spain and the temperature was enormous. It was in June and even at night when we did the concert, it was about twelve o'clock at night when we started, by the time the pipes came on I was having a devil of a job to keep the pitch down. To get down to A, to the same pitch as the orchestra, just purely and simply because of the heat. I don't know whether Maxwell Davies appreciated this or not. He probably did because that piece has been a good money spinner for him. He's had hundreds of thousands of performances of it all over the place.

**Iain MacDonald** Can I ask you George your impressions of present day piping with regard to, for example, the degree course which is available at The Royal Scottish Conservatoire, and with the completion of the National Piping Centre, do you feel that there's been progress made in bagpipe education?

George McIlwham Oh I think there's been tremendous development in that way. When I went to the Old Academy of Music the bagpipe and the guitar and the saxophone, they were regarded as not fit for purpose [laughter], they weren't accepted at all. But eventually the bagpipe was accepted because it has such a wonderful literature and if you're going to have a student who is going to go for degrees in piping, then that literature is invaluable because he'll have to learn all about it as most pipers did. They did that on their own, whereas nowadays you can go to the Conservatoire and you can get your degrees there, which according to a piece of paper, says that you're able to do this, that and the next thing.

Whether they'll ever really take the difficult task of playing these pieces in A Major instead of B Flat and E Flat, they'll have to have the instrument. They'll have to save up and buy the instrument in order to do it.

**Iain MacDonald      It was coincidental round about the same time that the now National Piping Centre was opened, what's your impression of that as an institution?**

George McIlwham      The National Piping Centre at that time or before it as you know that the College of Piping in Otago Street was the mecca for most pipers, and most of us went there. Now I studied with Seamus for a short time, Seamus McNeill who was the principal of the College of Piping and Seamus was a very good teacher who was very, very, strict but I found that unfortunately, with the new piping centre in MacPhater Street, you know the MacPhater building, that was beginning to take over from the old piping college, the old ideas which were good enough indeed and as you know Seamus McNeill published that little book on piobaireachd which is invaluable for most pipers.

When it came to the National Piping Centre, this was a different thing altogether. It was a wonderful place and it looked as if it was going to develop to such an extent that it would do away with any other college or piping institution. But we know that the College of Piping in Otago Street is still in existence and some famous pipers have been involved with the College of Piping there. To mention one, Donald MacPherson of course who is a wonderful player too. Unfortunately I don't think the National Piping School and the College of Piping in Otago Street saw eye to eye, and I think Seamus thought that he would become the principal of the new piping centre, but it didn't work out that way. To give it its proper title, what's its proper title? It's The National Piping Centre.

**Finlay MacDonald      The National Piping Centre yeah.**

George McIlwham    Yeah that's the proper title for the new MacPhater building and I think if I'm not mistaken, you can do all the degrees in piping that you want to at that particular institution.

**Finlay MacDonald    Yes well it's linked to the Conservatoire so the piping's done at the Piping Centre and the rest of the folk music side of it is at the Conservatoire so it's a good balance I guess.**

George McIlwham    Yes that's a wonderful balance. You see the days are so different from the old hidebound attitudes of, "well we can't have folk music in the academy or we can't have pipes or we can't have guitars or any other instrument, apart from the classical ones." We all just accepted that, but now as you say there's this link-up between the folk scene and classical scene and each of them are absolutely viable. In fact nowadays, if you hear classical music that is in a certain setting, whereas most of the great music as we call it is pop music, which many of the older pipers probably have difficulty understanding it all.

**Iain MacDonald        I think it's fair to say that these cases and point have added to raising the credibility of the instrument and its music having that facility, together with the College of Piping in the west end, but also the link up with the Conservatoire. It's given the instrument a complete new lease of life.**

George McIlwham    Undoubtedly, there's no question about that. I was at the meeting when it was decided that the guitar, the penny whistle and all these various other instruments that were used in the folk scene, folk flute and other instruments too like clarsach, they would all be accepted as musical instruments in their own right and that students could do their Doctorate of Music in that if they wanted to.

**Finlay MacDonald    When I was getting more interested in playing and improving my playing an old colleague of yours back in the young days, Jean Cornwell who took me on to do my**

**Higher Music at the time when I was at school, and she was a fantastic teacher and inspiration. Maybe it was part of your class or your group of friends but she very much appreciated the pipes as being a viable, strong traditional instrument. But at that time, the guy who was the head of music at my school said: “Oh no you can’t do Higher Music with your bagpipes, this is a proper music thing.” And Jean Cornwell said: “Why not, I’ll take him on and we can do it.” And she was an amazing inspiration and influence on me.**

George McIlwham That’s great that, wonderful yeah. You see what these people didn’t understand, they didn’t realise that the literature of the Highland bagpipe, the Scottish Highland bagpipe, is absolutely colossal. It’s all printed. There are books and books, and books, hundreds of them. Many of them are out of print now unfortunately, but those that are printed are beautifully done and nobody could have any excuse for not being able to see a piobaireachd written in a style that was well explained by Seamus McNeill in his little book called Piobaireachd, A Legendary Epic. And right enough, when you go back hundreds and hundreds of years to the McIlwhams, you realise that this is something that just didn’t suddenly develop, it’s been going for a long, long time and it has a terrific literature.

We were talking about Patrick Mòr MacCrimmon and Iain White used the theme of his Lament for the Children for that ballet Donald of the Burthens and I think it’s great that people should be exposed to that kind of literature so that they know that the bagpipe is not only a legitimate instrument, but is really the national instrument of Scotland.

I was going to talk about this Alba. Do you think that would be alright?

**Finlay MacDonald Yes please do, absolutely.**

George McIlwham One of the pieces I wrote for the orchestra was a piece called Alba or Alapa as they pronounce it Gaelic. It's a fanfare salute for Symphony Orchestra and Scottish Highland Bagpipes and I wrote this little note in the score:

“Alba is the Scottish Gaelic word meaning Scotland, described in the title as a Fanfare Salute for Symphony Orchestra with solo Scottish Highland bagpipe. This work is based on one of the composer's original tunes for the bagpipe. Since the tune in question forms the basic thematic material of the composition, the solo bagpipe being tuned to the pitch of the orchestra, is introduced as a solo instrument playing this theme at the end of the exposition section.

A rather unusual feature of this section of Alba is the introduction of pipe band drumming. In the absence of pipe band drummers, the orchestral drummers should try to achieve the correct effect. In the development and coda sections the orchestra dominates, but the bagpipe is used in rather untraditional manner to add excitement at the various high points and at the end of the work”.

Now I didn't mention the fact that the pipe band would be used in that because actually at the time when I wrote it, I thought that it would never be, ever, performed by pipes but the fact that the pipe has been accepted in colleges and academies and there's a link up with the National Piping Centre and the Conservatoire of Scotland, it stands to reason that they will be able to play things like this and be able to do works like this.

**Iain MacDonald My pipe band did your piece Alba last year at the Proms, Last Night of the Proms.**

George McIlwham Oh really.

**Iain MacDonald With the RNSO and it was very successful.**

George McIlwham Oh that's great. I'm very pleased to hear that because I was absolutely convinced that it would have been never

possible for pipers to get the idea of playing actually with a symphony orchestra.

What I did with it was once it reached the section where the pipes come in, I had a solo piper playing the tune so that the pipe band would know exactly where they were. And then when you get the introductory rolls on the drums, in comes the pipe band with the full tune at the end of that exposition section as I called it.

**Finlay MacDonald**    **Yeah. And this piece was recorded wasn't it?**

George McIlwham    Yes, it actually was. It was featured in the Classical Aid Concert, this was for African people. They collected a tremendous amount of money at that time. The pipe band that actually played on the occasion when I gave it its first performance was the British Caledonian Airways Pipe Band. A very fine pipe band and Alex Duthart, the principal drummer of Scotland, was actually playing with the British Caledonian at that time. I always remember when it came to the bit after I'd played the solo bagpipe part, the band came in without any trouble at all. We were really skipping along at a fair old lick but I managed to get a recording of that and it's the only time I think, apart from maybe when you did it yourselves, Iain, that the whole piece was performed. If it's given the right tempo, because it's very bright at the beginning but it slows down slightly when it comes to the pipes coming in with the tune. It was a little Welsh conductor Arwell Hughes who was the conductor and I said: "Now don't hang about too much, the fact is I don't want it to be slow, I've written it so that it will be quite fast." Like the Intercontinental it was used for a fast marching, not marching at a very slow pace which we would do normally at a heavy six eight march or something like that, but rather it was a good going quick march in order that they could manage. I noticed that it was used on one occasion for the Trooping of the Colour when they were marching down after the ceremony, they were playing the Intercontinental and it was ideal to keep them moving, to keep moving on.

**Finlay MacDonald** Yeah excellent.

George McIlwham .... in Scotland in Inverness or somewhere. It's called the piob beag, it's a small pipe, and once you get the power on you can...

**Iain MacDonald** The one I had was made in Sweden. It's called a Sägerstrom.

George McIlwham Ah really?

**Iain MacDonald** Pipe's, they're reacting but...

[Pipe Music – The Intercontinental March]

**Finlay MacDonald** What is that Iain?

**Iain MacDonald** The Intercontinental.

George McIlwham In the score I've got the brass playing introductory fanfares before the actual pipes come in, and then it would be great if the pipe band enters and then they actually play along with the orchestra. I added string parts to it and they were very effective and that Hutchie performance was, I was at that, and I thought that was great the way they did it. It complemented the little timpanist. It was terrific.

**Finlay MacDonald** I'm just thinking about the actual playing and your interpretation perhaps of traditional tunes on the flute, do you find that your piping background helps you understand the make-up of the tunes, rhythmical patterns? Is there any techniques that you do on the flute that you got from pipes or vice versa?

George McIlwham Very much so. In fact the fingering of the chanter is very similar in some ways to the flute, and the great thing is

that you memorise all of the stuff that you play on the bagpipe and you can do it on the flute. On the flute it's generally the key of G and D, whereas on the bagpipe it is different, but the thing is that if you're playing any tunes that are possible on the bagpipe and the flute, obviously there's no problem at all because you can memorise them very, very, quickly, very easily.

Yes, it's easy to get mixed up with the fingering between the flute and the bagpipe, you've just got to be careful in certain keys, but generally speaking it's pretty easy. It does help your memory, there's no question about it. Any piper who memorises say a good dozen or more tunes, in fact some pipers memorise hundreds of tunes I always remembered Pipe Major MacDonald. He used to play all sorts of stuff, how he memorised it all it was quite remarkable. Especially the heavy marches and strathspeys. I noticed that the gracing was quite heavy.

**Iain MacDonald**      **Can we expect any future compositions from you George?**

George McIlwham      Well you never know.

**Iain MacDonald**      **Anything in the pipeline? [Laughter].**

George McIlwham      You never know. The unfortunate thing is that a lot of this music that we've been talking about has sort of gone out of date, although I think for solo pipers with orchestras it will always be possible, but generally speaking it seems to have gone out of date. As I was saying to you, the modern pop scene is really dominating everything at the moment. Even when you come to University Challenge when they're doing pop music, I haven't a clue what it's all about but any of the classical composers you get them right away, there's no problem with that. But that's as we've been trained. I think pipers are more classically music orientated than just the ordinary music lover, because a piper will be very discerning about what he's playing and the form of it and everything. Whereas with pop music, I don't know if you feel the same way about it, but there's

a tremendous amount of repetition in it and it just keeps on repeating and repeating to such an extent that sometimes they just have to fade it out.

**Finlay MacDonald** I guess when you were learning did you have any particular favourite pipers that you liked to listen to?

George McIlwham Yes, my favourite of course would be Pipe Major Robert Reid. He was absolutely incredible, when it came to variations like the crunluath variation and piobaireachd, it was like a machine, although there was musicality there as well. It was absolutely fascinating how he could keep that going and have it absolutely perfect. Willie Connell who was his star pupil, he was very much the same. I don't know what happened to Willie, I think he went over to the States, whether he has done anything serious in piping over there, I should imagine that he probably has. We had him for quite a number of years as a tutor in the Milngavie Pipe Band. It was great to have him there.

**Finlay MacDonald** Did you know any other guys like Donald MacLeod or Duncan Johnston.

George McIlwham Yes of course, Donald MacLeod and Duncan Johnston yes. Duncan Johnston was the master of the jig, wasn't he whereas Donald was oh he was a master composer. Wee Donald MacLeod I don't know. Some of the music that he's actually written is quite incredible. You think that the chanter is very limited in scope but it's got a tremendous repertoire when you think of it and Donald MacLeod has added to that very significantly. He's a marvellous player and a marvellous little man.

I remember him coming into the BBC when he was really quite old and as you all know he was quite a heavy smoker so he must have had his pipes going pretty easily, pretty well to be able to sustain a full programme like that, and yet he did it without any bother at all.

**Finlay MacDonald** Did you record Pipeline live at the time?  
Was that a live broadcast or pre-recorded?

George McIlwham It was generally a recording Finlay. We recorded all of the programmes because I wrote the scripts and Robert would correct me on anything that was critical.

**Iain MacDonald** Inaccurate?

Anything that was gramatically maybe a bit doubtful he'd say: "No, could you rephrase that," or do something else to it. That was always a challenge because when you were recording something you wanted to keep it going and you didn't want to stop and think for ages, so you had to just do the thing there and then.

**Iain MacDonald** How long was your broadcasting career?

George McIlwham It would be about seven years I would think Iain. I did seven years in all and then Robert Crawford he retired and it was MacDonald who took over. Hugh MacDonald who was head of music, he became the head of music, but he took over from Robert Crawford and I used to do a lot of programmes with him. He was very good and very friendly and then suddenly he just announced to me when we were recording pipers in a pipe band, no it was solo pipers in Edinburgh down in Leith and there was a concert hall there and we went to this, and that night he just said to me: "Oh I'm leaving you, I'm going to be a head of music in the Glasgow Orchestral BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra." He was the head of music, he became the head of music. So that meant that I was having to find somebody else who would take over, and then I think it was Glyn Bragg who took over the piping department at that time because I'd decided that enough was enough. I couldn't do the whole lot.

**Iain MacDonald** Did you find it quite stressful at times in getting enough material and time and targets?

George McIlwham    Yeah, I found that terribly difficult. Sometimes I would be out running about, speaking to pipe majors and say: “What is that second tune called?” And they would say: “I haven’t a clue.” [Laughter]. They would put on a whole selection and wouldn’t be able to name one tune in it. They were under stress at the time too, but I used to be able to try and get right from the pipe major the actual name of the tune so that I could announce all the tunes in the programme, the World Pipe Band Championship.

Meeting the bands that came up and won it at that particular time and I was always fascinated to know just what was going to happen with the bands because eventually, the programme which has gone from strength to strength, it’s an excellent programme, many of the bands are absolutely incredible, especially the East Canadian bands the likes of 78<sup>th</sup> Fraser Highlanders and Simon Fraser University and of course the Irish band, Field Marshal Montgomery. I remember with I think it was with Hugh MacDonald, we went over to Ireland to record the Field Marshal Montgomery Pipe Band and they were all youngsters, they were all just young boys that had grown up with the band. But they were terrific players, they were great players and the pipe major has been the same pipe major for donkey’s years. I just forget his name.

**Iain MacDonald        Richard Parkes.**

George McIlwham    That’s right, Richard Parkes. He’s been there for donkey’s years and now they’re winning the World Pipe Band Championship as you know.

**Iain MacDonald        They take it very seriously, particularly in Northern Ireland, in the south of course as well with the success of Terry Tully’s band.**

George McIlwham    The south of Ireland, I know they have pipe bands that were very, very keen and they came over to Scotland and it was pipe band drumming that really stemmed from I think it was Paddy Donovan, he was the man who was the pipe band drummer that

Alex Duthart cottoned on to and said: “Now this is the way of the future, this is how pipe band drumming should be.” And it was all the syncopation and the work that they could put into it that fascinated him. He started to do the same thing in his own scores and his own books. When you look at a pipe band drumming score it’s very, very, complicated. He was a wonder at it.

**Iain MacDonald      There was a tune written for that man,  
Paddy Donovan.**

George McIlwham      Yes Paddy Donovan that’s right. In fact I wrote a wee tune for him myself [laughter]. I can’t remember it for the life of me. I remember at the time we were doing a concert, it was in Motherwell in the Civic Centre there and I decided I would do this Paddy Donovan on the flute, because I was actually doing a flute spot, and it was all based on the Alex Duthart, Paddy Donovan.

As you know, that the link up with this pipe band drummer from Basle in Switzerland, he was very keen on that type of drumming too, and they had the seminars and get-togethers when they would discuss various points on pipe band drumming. It’s all fascinating stuff.

**Finlay MacDonald      Is there any other things that you would like  
to talk about?**

George McIlwham      What I was going to do Finlay, I was going to give you a copy of all these things. I know you probably won’t need them but if you didn’t mind keeping them in a place.

**Finlay MacDonald      Absolutely, that’ll be great.**

George McIlwham      These are two Finlay that’ll be quite fascinating for you. One is a biography on the flute and one’s a biography with the pipes of course. They’re written out very nicely and they’re legible so that really and truly I don’t think there will be any problem with you or anybody who wants to read them.

**Finlay MacDonald** It's great to have this information as well.

George McIlwham All the stuff is there and I'll put the rest of it with it. There's the Intercontinental, Alba and Donald of the Burthens that's one that will always keep cropping up somewhere.

You two are the only two I thought would ever be able to do it.

**Finlay MacDonald** Oh great, that's excellent, that's great to have.

George McIlwham I must find out from David Ingles, he's the principal double-base player in the orchestra, in the Scottish National and I'll find out from him who is actually doing the bagpipe part in China.

**Finlay MacDonald** I should bring you along my Border pipes, I've been working on them with the tuning with Nigel Richards who makes them and I've managed to get the full chromatic scale out of the Border pipe chanter.

George McIlwham Have you got keys on them?

**Finlay MacDonald** No, just ordinary cross-fingering.

George McIlwham Oh that's amazing.

**Finlay MacDonald** I'll let you hear that. I guess you would be interested.

George McIlwham Oh very much so.

**Finlay MacDonald** But it has opened up other places to go.

George McIlwham I'm sure you can.

**Finlay MacDonald** So people can hear it.

George McIlwham Because you're heavily involved with the folk scene and your own group and the things that you do with the pipes yourself.

**Finlay MacDonald Yeah exactly. It's been excellent, listening to you.**

George McIlwham It's the old-fashioned attitude to it and I must say I've managed to keep records right from 1954, joining the BBC Scottish, right up to 1968, no to '86 I should say when I left.

**Finlay MacDonald Oh that's excellent.**

George McIlwham I've got various things all mentioned in there. What happened with the orchestra, it was amazing, I joined the BBC Scottish, Gibson and Irvin were there, the conductors, Dohnanyi. He came to the Edinburgh Festival, the Usher Hall. He was an amazing man. He's an old Hungarian composer, then Jack Thomson was the interim conductor for the death of Iain White in eighty-six, in nineteen sixty, then Norman Delmar took over and James Lockheart was the assistant. And it goes right down. One of the high points was in sixty-four when the Shostokovich, the composer, came over to the Usher Hall and he would say he didn't do very much because at that time the KGB were very, oh, very strict, and poor old Shostokovich\* was. He never let on anything at all. And yet we played one of his symphonies and it was absolutely wonderful.

**Finlay MacDonald So he was there when you played one of his symphonies?**

George McIlwham Yes very much so, oh aye. But to see the man he was cowed.

**Finlay MacDonald It was a difficult time?**

George McIlwham    Very, very, quiet and he knew that the KGB were watching him. In fact we went to Poland. When we went to Poland I took the pipes with me obviously. I decided I would take the pipes to Poland, but the KGB they were very much in control at that time and they made life very difficult for anybody who was not British. I mean we were treated with kid gloves but there were some others that had a terrible time of it.

**Finlay MacDonald    Did you travel a lot with the orchestra?**

George McIlwham    We did quite a lot. We went to Hong Kong and we did the Last Night of the Proms at Hong Kong. It was the Donald of the Burthens. The story about that is that there were two Chinamen who were to open the doors for me to let me go onto the balcony to play The Reel of Tulloch and neither of them could speak English, and I'm saying: "Open the doors, open the doors." And of course they didn't get it [laughter]. And if it hadn't been for one of the boys, one of the Glasgow chaps that had been heaving the stuff about, he came out and said: "What's wrong Geordie are you having trouble?" I said: "I can't get into this, I need to get in now otherwise I'm gonna miss it." So he opened the doors for me and the Chinaman went crackers.

That happened to me in Spain as well. I wanted to go in at a certain time and a Spaniard who was on the door, "oh no, no, no, no, you can't do that." [Laughter]. These conductors had no idea. I often felt, I don't know if you felt the same yourselves, I'm sure you would, that the conductors just left it to you. They weren't much help at all. They'd then say: "Now look, in order to make this easy for you, you know at that big crescendo, as soon as that finishes, I'll give you the beat". But no, none of them ever did that. They just waited until the pipe came in and that was it, hope for the best [laughter].

**Finlay MacDonald    And I guess a good way to end up what advice would you give to any young piper wanting to develop their skills in playing with their instruments or composing?**

George McIlwham I don't think they would have much in the way of trouble now Finlay, except a financial one. Having in other words save enough money to be able to buy a set of pipes in A and a set of pipes in D Flat, E Flat. I know it's all very well to say that you could have the two sets, but I would say a bit nervous about the fact that the pipes can go wonky, something can happen, a reed could fall out or something like that. In order to be absolutely certain that I would have a spare set, I used to have two sets tuned to A, concert pitch. One set was not quite so easy to play, but I always managed with the other set but had the back-up. It just gives you that little bit of confidence to go on at the time.

**Iain MacDonald Finlay's made extensions for the drones to enable a B Flat set to go down to A.**

George McIlwham Oh that's great.

**Iain MacDonald It means of course that you don't have to have big, big reeds.**

George McIlwham No. Great big noisy reeds.

**Iain MacDonald Exactly and a big long bass drone reed which protrudes below the bottom of the stop. If the bag hits it, it could very well end up inside the bag.**

George McIlwham Yes it would go into the bag, that's right.

**Iain MacDonald But that's a good compromise, the extensions.**

George McIlwham Oh that's terrific.

**Finlay MacDonald It's on top of the drones, they just fit in.**

George McIlwham Just sit on top on the drones?

**Finlay MacDonald** Yeah just a tube but exactly the same, or just under the outer of the end of the drone. And you just put it in, it extends the drone by about that much and that's the way.

George McIlwham Oh that's great Finlay, I think that's a great idea. You deserve a medal for doing that because it can cause a lot of problems [laughter].