

Piping Today Issue 25
Sample feature 1



Entranced at the



OVERALL winner of 2006 Glenfiddich Piping Championship was Angus MacColl from Benderloch, Argyllshire, congratulated here by his wife.



2006 GLENFIDDICH PIPING CHAMPIONSHIP

I AM not a piper, well at least not yet. I am a postgraduate student in Anthropology from Concordia University (Montréal, Canada) working in Glasgow on the field-work portion of my research for a Master of Arts degree.

Anthropologically, my research explores the interconnectedness of the playing of bagpipes and the production of sound (music) with one's own exploration of his or her identity.

In this work, I am examining what inspires someone to take up the bagpipes and investigating the meaning that is derived through playing. Does a person necessarily and perso-

nally identify with Scotland when they begin studying the pipes? Or is it simply a perception created by socio-cultural myths?

How significant is it to have a connection to Scotland and what is the importance of place in a bagpiper's mind? Similarly, do images (what I refer to as soundscapes) of Scotland come to mind when one hears or when one plays the bagpipes?

I am examining why, in this global community in which we live, are the bagpipes so strongly associated with Scotland (or is this something found strictly outside of Scotland) and surveying how Scottish pipers express their

views of piping as a cultural activity.

A good friend of mine once said that, as Canadians, we are fascinated by cultures or nations that have ancient roots, mostly because — apart from our First Nations people — we simply don't have them. Canada is a land of immigrants, most of them recent. This observation leads me to wonder whether my own fascination with Scotland and its national instrument has anything to do with that poverty of ancient roots in Canada.

Since September 2006, I have been attempting to answer many of these questions through my own personal efforts of learning to

Glenfiddich



AT the 2006 Glenfiddich Piping Championship at Blair Castle on 28 October were (from left) Murray Henderson, Allan Russell, Euan MacCrimmon, William McCallum, Angus MacColl, the event's founding patron Sandy Grant Gordon, Alastair Dunn, Gordon Walker, Greg Wilson, Iain Speirs and Roddy MacLeod.

play the pipes and through my volunteering at the National Piping Centre in Glasgow. I am very thankful to the Centre's principal, Roddy MacLeod, who graciously welcomed me into the National Piping Centre and gave me the opportunity to work closely with both its staff and instructors. It is an experience that I will cherish for many years to come. Consequently, being around so many pipers took its toll and it wasn't long before I found myself drawn into this highly complex and invigorating place; that of the piping world.

On Saturday, 28 October, I had the opportunity of attending the Glenfiddich Piping

Championship at Blair Castle in Perthshire. As an eager and curious newcomer to the world of piping, I jumped at this chance to attend such a highly esteemed event. I also confess to the enjoyment of making a few of my friends back home in the Black Watch (RHR) Pipes and Drums of Canada a little envious.

In a mood rather like that of embarking on a religious pilgrimage, Alex, Mike and I — all of us Canadians — set out for Blair Castle in Blair Atholl.

We left Glasgow's grey skies and rainy weather for a horizon that suggested clearer weather. Arriving at Stirling, we were imme-

diately embraced by the beauty of Scotland's landscapes and historical architecture. Flat lands slowly transformed into a hilly terrain embellished by deep shades of green and the rich warm colours of autumn.

Although the sun had kissed our cheeks a few times during the voyage, when we got off the train at Blair Atholl station, the skies turned grey once again and a cold mist instantly dampened our faces as we walked along the main road leading to the Castle.

Blair Castle's distinctive white walls eventually appeared through the tall trees and then, seconds later, the castle was fully in view. We

entered from the side entrance located on the eastern side, which opened into a glass-enclosed dining area and food counter where hot and cold meals could be bought. The room was abuzz with men, women and children, and the sound of pipes could clearly be heard coming from behind the closed doors to the left of the room.

To one side of the dining area, flat-screen televisions were set up, enabling those outside the competition room to observe the performances.

I scanned the room quickly and noticed a few faces I recognized: Dr. Simon McKerrell and Gareth Rudolph from the National Piping Centre, and Dr Gary West from the University of Edinburgh. Although I recognized many others there as important figures in the piping world, I could not remember their names. I had been told to particularly look for Angus MacColl and Jim MacGillivray by Pipe Major Cameron Stevens of the Black Watch (RHR) Pipes and Drums of Canada, and who had asked me to say 'hello' in his behalf, but I had no idea what they looked like.

Other pipers I had been told to watch for were Gordon Walker, Greg Wilson, William McCallum, Euan MacCrimmon, Iain Speirs, Murray Henderson, Allan Russell and of course Roddy MacLeod and Alastair Dunn. Alastair Dunn, Roddy MacLeod, and Gordon Walker were the only three I recognized: Alastair Dunn who I had seen at the National Piping Centre, Roddy MacLeod, of course, and Gordon Walker, from my National Piping Centre Tutor Book. Nevertheless, I was well aware and acknowledged that I was standing amongst many of the world's great pipers.

The actual performances took place in the castle's great hall behind closed doors to the west of the glass-covered dining area. A ticket table sat near the entrance into the great hall, whose doors had just opened.

It wasn't until we had found seats and I had organised my 'researcher' material that I took the time to look around and take in all that the room had to offer.

Sitting seven rows back from the stage, we had an excellent view of both the judges and the competitors. A huge stuffed Highland cow's head hung from the wall directly facing us and overlooking each competitor. Surrounding the cow, and on every wall of the room, deer skulls and antlers covered just about every square inch of the room. The ceiling itself consisted

of dark wooden fixtures, huge wooden beams and arches. It was a "great" room indeed, with fireplaces on both eastern and western walls.

The judges — Iain MacFadyen, Dr Jack Taylor and John Wilson for the piobaireachd, and Pipe Major Jimmy Banks, John McDougall and Jim McGillivray for the march, strathspey and reel — sat to the left of the stage and the players entered from an hallway on the right.

We settled seconds before Alastair Dunn's piobaireachd performance and watched every performance that followed.

Apart from at several Highland games, I had never attended a piping competition, and certainly had never had a chance to hear such highly ranked players. As we took our seat, Alastair had already begun tuning his pipes and I eagerly awaited my very first piobaireachd performance.

Several times I leaned over to Mike and ask if the tune had begun yet. Mike, annoyed with me, eventually leaned over and said, "once he starts you'll know." I thought to myself: "Great! How will I ever figure this one out?"... but by the following piobaireachd performance, I had it figured out, and eagerly waited for that moment where I could hear the switch; my first small lesson of the day.

Never in my life had I heard pipes sound so good and I still cannot get over the powerful effect of the piobaireachd I heard.

The combination of wooden structures and the high ceiling of the room, and the shaped wood of the bagpipes came together to produce a perfect acoustic experience.

During each piobaireachd performance, the sound produced by the drones seemed to float from the stage and over the audience like mist rolling in off a foggy sea. Eventually the warm and heavy sound would slowly envelop us all in its rich and powerful sound, like a thick heavy blanket.

In contrast, the firm, strident sound of each note produced by the chanter created a strange disturbance to the soft humming of the drones but then blended into the soundscape. The feeling that grew within me when I would close my eyes during a piobaireachd was what I found truly magical and was most fascinated by. It was as though I could feel myself being transported away by the music.

Gareth Rudolph once spoke to me of the hypnotic effect of piobaireachd and, although I thought I had understood what he meant at the time he said it, I finally felt and experienced

fully what he had tried to describe. In fact, I found it more than hypnotic; it was like a going back in time. I am certain that my perception of the music was highly skewed by the romanticism that pervades this realm, nevertheless you can feel and understand how the music fits in with the sea, the glens, and the lochs. It is as Neil Munro once wrote; "music to stir the blood and reach the inner soul of man."

The march, strathspey and reel competition was just as exciting as the piobaireachd competition but, obviously, more upbeat. And, as little as I might know about piping, I knew I was hearing some fantastic playing and I remained completely mesmerised by each and every performance.

I quickly realised that I could not even begin to appreciate this experience in the same way that a piper from back home would, especially one who has never had the opportunity to come to Scotland.

I did, however, appreciate the immensity and importance of this event for myself, as an anthropologist and researcher, but also more personally as a newly committed and eager student of the pipes. I appreciated wholly that I was standing amongst some of the greatest pipers of a generation, great and accomplished individuals, and sought-after instructors.

I must admit, it certainly felt quite strange standing in a room rubbing shoulders with some of these individuals — especially since I recognised so few of them until their appearance on stage. Strangely enough, it felt completely 'normal' and 'ordinary', while at the same time completely surreal. The thought of being so close to so many famous pipers, stars in their own capacity, was awe-inspiring.

It was at that very moment that I completely grasped the significance of this experience for myself; without truly wanting to admit it, I had become a part of this piping world that I once had gazed at from afar.

A piper once told me: "Once you start on the pipes, you will never want to put them down. It's a strange world that you will never want to leave." I had been warned. ●

RESULTS

Overall winner: Angus MacColl.

Piobaireachd: Angus MacColl, 1 (Red Speckled Bull); Greg Wilson, 2 (My Dearest); Euan MacCrimmon, 3 (Mrs MacLeod of Talisker); Roddy MacLeod, 4 (Earl of Ross); Iain Speirs, 5 (Cherede darivea).

March, Strathspey and Reel: Gordon Walker, 1; Willie McCallum, 2; Greg Wilson, 3; Angus MacColl, 4; Roddy MacLeod, 5.

Balvenie Medal for services to piping:
Rt Hon. Sir Iain MacKay, New Zealand.