



NOTING THE TRADITION

An Oral History Project from the National Piping Centre



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So here we are, it's Don Warrack on behalf of the National Piping Centre at the home of Andrew McMorrine in Dunvegan on the Isle of Skye. It's the 24th of March 2012. Andrew's going to tell us about his famous uncle, Andrew MacNeil of Colonsay. So over to you Andrew.

Thank you Donny. Well, Andrew MacNeil or Andrew Sommerville MacNeil, as his full name was, was born in 1915, he was born in Helensburgh, Dunbartonshire, to island blood and family from the island of Colonsay. So he was brought up in Helensburgh, but maintained that root to the family in Colonsay and returned latterly to spend most of his life farming there on Oronsay, a beautiful tidal island just off the southern end of the island of Colonsay.

So he started his piping as a young fellow in Helensburgh with the Jubilee Pipe Band, which was just pre-war, the Pipe Major of that band was Alec Reid of Robert Reid the famous piper, the same family. Alec in fact introduced Andrew to Robert and he became a pupil of Robert Reid pre-war, so he must have shown enough promise that Alec saw that this was somebody that the brother could work with.

The Jubilee Band was rather a fine example of a group of people coming together under good tuition, it was Grade 3 I think, it didn't compete at the top level, they were young, they were enthusiastic, I remember him saying that they could all afford a kilt, I think the funds extended to a bonnet and they all went out in a grey shirt, come rain or high waters [laughter]. So it wasn't high falutin' but they played and they played well and they actually played for the launching at the launching of the Queen Elizabeth the First.

Andrew then started attending Robert Reid, now, Robert Reid at that time was a rising star, maybe one of the best of the competitive players of that era, if not the best, he certainly was a leading figure and a very inspirational teacher, so A.S. as we called him, would have been very, very keen to become a pupil, and he did. Robert was a remarkable man, he'd started off life from a mining community in Slamannan, he had gone as a boy piper, he must have had talent and been spotted and went with a ballet troupe, it sounds like something out of a Russian novel, and she was I think of that kind of Eastern European, I think. But I remember him recounting some snippets from it, and it had been in fact a great education,

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because the discipline of the ballet and the ballet school and the fact that he as a young piper was an act of part of it, so everything, the performance, the style of it, your posture, was all part of that. And that I think is evident in Robert's pose and poise and his style, he was also a soldier...

And his tutu [laughter].

Yes, well [laughter] very distinct.

Did he travel through Europe then with that ballet troupe?

They did. Yes. I think they did.

This was pre-war, was it?

This is pre-first war.

Oh, really?

Yes. Because he then joined... he was in the HLI as a young, maybe even a boy soldier. I think he was in Mesopotamia in the Far East, it's now Iraq. It was a wonderful mixture of that, that training with the sort of artistic side of it and then the military side. Mark you, it must be remembered that that military direction which might be fashionable now to rather dismiss, was where most professional pipers would have actually been able to carry out their trade.

Was that still ahead in his career, is it the military?

It is, yes. Well, the First War was when I think he joined up. But they had a territorial connection, as did the brothers.

Because it's certainly not an association, pipes and ballet, is it?

No. Breaking new ground. So AS is attending him, he is actually competing at that time just before the war, he said there were three or two others that he remembers particularly from that time, they were pupils of Reid's at the time, Willie Connell who was very successful, it was claimed he was earning medals. William Barrie was making the music and A.S.

described himself 'I was the Parrot,' but by that he's actually being rather humble, what he means is that he was drinking in everything, and actually I would say he would certainly not have let his master down in that he had grasped what Reid was about, and Reid had been a pupil of McDougall Gillies and played in that tradition of the Cameron School, which went all the way back through McDougal Gillies to Angus McKay.

It's difficult to describe in terms of... anybody who knows about piobaireachd will understand that from the Cameron School there's a style of playing that is very recognisable, and AS was in that tradition. It wasn't a small minded thing because they were not averse to others in any way, but that was the school that they came from and they prided themselves on it, and it was something to hear. My brother and I were brought up listening to that and it's something that still moves me. I still think my brother and others were very, very fortunate to have heard it because it was something that was quite wonderful. I'll come to that later if I may.

I think he competed at Cowal pre-war, but by 1938 other events took over. His father died in '38, which I think threw him off the competing circuit that year, and then in 1939 another war broke out so that put an end to that. He volunteered and he went to the 9th HLI or the Glasgow Highlanders, where oddly enough, there was another Reid connection because the Pipe Major of the 1st Battalion Glasgow Highlanders was Willie Reid, a brother of Alec and of Robert Reid.

A.S. didn't stay in the 1st Battalion because then they were expanding fast because of the war situation and he went to the 2nd Battalion, which was in a different division, the 1st Battalion was 52nd Lowland, and his Battalion, the 2nd, was 46th Brigade of the 15th Scottish division. It was an HLI brigade, so you had the 10th HLI and the 11th HLI, which all of these would have had a very proud piping tradition, and as these units shoot down and formed and things; there was quite a lot of rivalry between them. So something like a war time battalion, the pipers would have been a fundamental part of it as they were of any Highland, particularly Scottish regiment. They were stationed down in the Borders, East or Midlothian called East Linton, they went south to Wiltshire and then to Essex, and then back up to Northumberland. His descriptions of that... he was evidently a very willing soldier as he'd volunteered, he wasn't by

inclination I think of a regimental mind, in fact an independent spirit, but that atmosphere I think they all had to get on with it, and he got into it.

In those days were they trained as soldiers as well or just...?

Pipers were, yes.

... Mainly a piper during the war?

A piper was also a soldier. Yes. Sometimes they were used as medics and whatever, but they were also... a piper had to train.

It makes sense if you're going to war I suppose.

It does. They were a long time stationed in Britain, their first action came much later but my goodness they went right into it because they went in D-Day plus nine they went through, and up through past Caen and then to the so called 'Scottish Corridor' and the 'Falaise Pocket' etc, right through to the north of Germany around Bremen and to Hamburg. So I think to give you a flavour of that would be, I remember him talking about the piper's duties, and plus being trained as a soldier you also had band duties for parades and such like, the whole day if you were duty piper you had reveille 'Hey, Johnny Cope' etc, to get everybody moving. You might be called upon to pipe at various events of the day, company calls, parades, that sort of thing, and lights out, sodger lay down in your pickle of straw.

Just as an aside I heard on the 50th commemoration of the D-Day landings, it was a German troop that was defending, commenting about the pipers coming ashore they would not shoot at them because they thought they were just crazy "dummkopfs" and they just left them alone. So maybe it was a good thing they all had a set of pipes instead of a Bren gun [laughter].

Well, possibly. I think you would have been lucky. I remember hearing that was Lovat said pipers when they landed...

I think a lot of them would have been cut down.

Well, they were. In fact actually interestingly, because the casualties had been so high amongst the pipers in the Great War, they were forbidden to carry their pipes, but they did get around that.

If the German was telling the stories [laughter].

I think there could well be some truth in that because I remember actually A.S.'s adjutant Leslie Kerr Robertson who I met much later when living in Skye here, and Kerr Robertson remembered actually going up that Scottish Corridor, so they went through the Bocage and the Normandy landscape and they changed on a high plateau with almost like heathland and they were trapped there and nobody could move, they were getting a terrible hammering from German sort of minenwerfer things that send a mortar type mine thing in the air and you could hear it coming, and Kerr Robertson said nobody could move, they were bogged down and he was peering over this lip of this edge of the plateau and all he could see was this heathland with them taking terrible explosions, and suddenly he felt a tap on his boot behind and it was Tiny Barber the brigadier, saying very politely in French what the F's going on, what's holding you up?

And they both tried to look over and could hardly get their heads up by the amount of stuff that was coming over, when suddenly a piper stood up way out in the middle of this wasteland and played as if standing in the barracks square, and after that wee clumps of men started getting up and rushing forward dropping, and the whole thing started moving. But that was despite orders that they were not to carry, but the Bren section put their pipes in the boxes at the back of the Bren Carrier and took them up. I asked him who was it, was that A.S. and he said at that distance he couldn't tell, but it would be rather typical I think of any of them at that time, and it did have that motivation which it historically had always had.

A brave thing to do.

There was the lighter side of it as well, because all the time they were training in England, north of England, whatever, they were called on for war bonds and things, and I was showing you that photograph earlier Donny, that's a war bond parade where they did public displays and things to raise funds for the war, they put on displays of dancing and piping. I remember the same fellow telling me a wonderful tale of knowing each

unit, the Glasgow Highlanders or the HLI, whoever it was, they wanted to have the best pipers so when they got somebody like Barber who was a Cameron man and a regular soldier and a great knowledge and interest in piping, so when he announced as a brigadier that he was coming to visit, your adjutant was the man who had to organise this thing and he said that he thought he had it in the bag because he had A.S. whom he knew he could rely on for piobaireachd.

And he also had another card in the shape, an unlikely shape of a Private Rose, who was a fantastic cook, so when Barber and his staff arrived, A.S. was first out for piobaireachd, which he did supremely, and then they had a beautiful meal. Barber and staff thoroughly enjoyed this and he said he wanted to thank them very much because it was the finest he'd had since he'd become brigadier in that brigade, and it was the finest piobaireachd, he made two requests, another Pibroch and he wanted to congratulate the cook. So A.S. was striking up, so the adjutant told me, for the second piobaireachd. The cook, who was Private Rose by name, was anything but, because he'd, for whatever reason, he'd broken out in a sort of plague of boils, and they'd painted him with gentian violet to try and cure him. So as the piper's striking up Rose is going out to take his due accolade at which point the General and his staff see this figure with the boils and the purple and they took a horrid fright and hurriedly leave, at which point A.S. lost the blow-stick and started laughing so [laughing] Robbie's dream collapsed.

So they finished their war in Hamburg, and then they'd be de-mobbed, came back home and A.S. went to Colonsay, he went back to Colonsay. He married Flora, who was the daughter of Calum and Ina MacNeil who'd farmed Oronsay, and they took on the shop in Colonsay, and I think at that stage his piping would probably have taken a back seat because he had been through a very ghastly, and they reckoned that that campaign through France and Germany was as horrific fighting as any other theatre in that war. So I don't think the pipes would have featured for a while when he came back. He worked around the shop and then he took the lease on Oronsay, which in his day would have been a lot of work.

The dog handling thing is interesting because part of his war time experience had been with war dogs, and to farm on any west coast farm of any hill farm you need good dogs, and he said about that with relish, and

he was an extremely good handler of dogs. So between that, keeping the stock, there were probably about sixty cattle and followers, and six hundred sheep.

So this was a crofting existence?

It was small farm, big enough that they could actually; he did make it a very successful farm. But hard work because in those days you had to winter the beasts inside, nowadays with silage and bales and such like you can do it another way. In those days you didn't, you had to take them in at night in the winter and that was a lot of work because you had to feed them, muck out, let them out, water them or whatever, and of course you had to crop in the summer, so you had hay and then corn and such like. But he did, he went back to his piping then and that probably is the period where he really concentrated on his, he was an all round player, but his great favourite and real love was the ceòl mòr, the piobaireachd. And he kept in touch with Robert Reid and it's during that period as youngsters I remember them, and Reid who had been his tutor became his mentor and friend, and used to come up and they would have time together.

So he didn't follow the competitive circuits of the Highland Games?

Well, he did, but as a judge.

He didn't play as a competitor?

No. And that came later on, because he had a huge network of acquaintances, the army thing, so many of them had been in that.

And so many of the top notchers too.

Yes. His connections were quite remarkable, a network that was worldwide almost. William Barrie went to California I think, he went to the States, he wrote a very fine piobaireachd and called it 'Andrew MacNeil of Colonsay.' There were so many of them, his connections, I'm just thinking back to that stage Robert Reid himself came out. There would also have been a constant to-ing and fro-ing, he was extremely friendly with Roddy MacDonald, Ruaraidh Roidein, he was a famous South Uist player and Glasgow Police, brother of John, who was the Pipe

Major of the Glasgow Police. So all of those were connections. You had, I've jotted down some names of the people I remember coming, Roddy MacDonald we've mentioned, a connection to Seonaidh, Ronald Morrison, also Uist, Ronnie Lawrie, who was an Oban, Hector MacFadyen, Pennyghael, whose brother were in Colonsay and both actually worked in Oronsay on the farm in the early years. Iain MacFadyen a cousin of theirs, a Pipe Major and tutor and competitor of the highest order. J.D. Burgess was a connection later made actually, but interestingly because during the war A.S. had been and completed the Pipe Major's course at Edinburgh Castle under Willie Ross.

Now, Burgess was a pupil of Ross's and they were both lively characters and a great friendship developed there, and an interesting one too because I'd said A.S. and Reid and MacDougall Gillies came from the Cameron School, well, Burgess and Ross had the Macpherson and I think it was a great object of interest to them and a topic of conversation of looking at those different things and both came to the conclusion that where they were was not all that different from each other, that the two disparate schools, if you like, the same kinds of values were part of it.

And I think that is the thing that I remember most enjoying, because both my brother and I were going to art school and we were very interested in that side of it and to see and to listen to them playing, I would say the most exciting thing for us was that here was something that was akin to any other form of art of a really high quality, because the way they'd been taught or the way that Reid passed it on, its passage and phrase, so you had a ground and variations in piobaireachd and that ground had to somehow, should reflect throughout your performance.

And I can remember A.S. saying Reid said that when you're trying to play and perform you must think vertically as well, that you take your music across the page but you also have to bring something down vertically through it and you have to literally feel the time, it's not just something taken straight from the note on the page, but the beauty of the relationship between the master and the pupil is that you develop a skill that you then interpret the thing for yourself in very much the same way that a sculptor would work in the studio of another.

And I think listening to these pieces that they were playing and I can remember that at this stage when we were boys if you'd finished a day's work in the field, the hay or whatever, in the evening they would often play and you'd be of this setting there on Oronsay, this beautiful island, jewel of an island with its white beaches and the sea all around, with the carving school and hearing Reid playing and then A.S. playing. I remember one particular one below the high cross, and this absolutely stunning carving, late medieval carving, with all the vigour of the plant form and the scroll, and Reid had chosen, he'd asked Old Ina, who was a beautiful island woman, what would her favourite be and she'd asked for 'Too Long In This Condition.' On hearing him playing that and then A.S. played, Ina's daughter, his wife Flora's favourite 'Lament For The Children,' that wonderful Patrick Og tune. And that kind of thing it was spellbinding, a summer evening with the colours of the stone and the sound of this music, it was in fact like...

Sometimes you hear the pipes in the rivers, I find, and in the tap water [laughing].

That's right [laughter]. Yes. Just all the elements blend together, don't they?

That's great. And his involvement with the National Piping Centre, was that a feature to come?

Yes. I think that grew out of his involvement when he started going back to judging and to the Piobaireachd Society and things like that, and a whole host of other people. His network was phenomenal, and from that when the moves came to the National Piping Centre, he got himself very much involved.

Was that when he was established? Was it existing?

No. This was prior to it. And it was very much his hope that Seamus's College of Piping and the new National Piping Centre could be one, he didn't wish it to be anything other than that and did his very best to bring the thing together. It didn't work in the end, but that was the spirit of it, and I think it was he who brought in Brian and Oona Ivory onto the board.

Certainly they managed by a combination of skills and Oona to pull together and raise an incredible amount of money.

So I would say that he was very, very proud of that and very proud to see the National Piping Centre there and Roddy MacLeod and the team gathering, and I think it was a lovely tribute to that tradition that they had that they wished that to go on. They loved the thought of it being passed onto people, that knowledge, and he was quite a remarkable character in that one, but even as an older person in his eighties he didn't think in a rigid sort of way, and the last thing that he did was he left his pipes to Allan MacDonald and that was a compliment to Allan, but also to the whole idea of the college. And the idea that piobaireachd is something, it is the most unique thing and there's no other pipe tradition in the world that has anything equivalent to it, it's unique to the highland bagpipe. And I like that idea that he saw in Allan somebody who was going to push the knowledge and the music and such. So I think something that would have kept him happy. So a mixture then Donny, of.

That's a great recollection of your uncle.

If I had to think of some tunes, if it was marches then it would be 'Lord Alexander Kennedy,' or 'Abercairney Highlanders.'

I must admit ignorance on a lot of the pipe tunes you're mentioning because I just like listening to pipe bands, I'm not.

Nor was he in particular, but those are great competition tunes too and really with great style and he loved all that. And piobaireachd of course was his, I think amongst his favourites 'The Wee Spree,' I often heard him playing that. 'Lament for MacSwan of Roaig,' 'Lament For The Children,' all of these big tunes. And then a wee clever post-script might be something that came say at the end of the war when the spirit was a bit rebellious and they all wanted home, but they would sneak in a popular and a ditty or a hymn tune or something like that, and I can just see him smiling very often when he'd finished off, so I thought he'd slip in something like 'There Is A Happy Land Far, Far Away.' And it does take you back to the fact that they saw the worst and the best of times.

I bet they did.

And they left a great legacy I think. I know that the families they were billeted on in Hamburg, so many of them came all the way out to Oronsay to see them. I remember one family in particular they'd been the burger masters family and they were billeted on and they said they were starving, and these boys gave them half of everything they had, if they hadn't have done that they would have died. And I think if you've been through a brutal war like that, to save some of your humanity in that way is remarkable, and their music and their love of it was worthy of that.

Wonderful. Did he compose at all? Did he do any compositions?

He wasn't bad at that at all. There are one or two things that he put down that would be most interesting if you add them together. He was very good at putting, say there was a first part, he would work at that and produce another one. There are lots of recordings of him and it's something that would be worth putting together. Both my step-sons played and Ewan managed luckily to spend some time with A.S., so he has a lot of tapes, as does Ian MacFadyen and various others. And then he put down quite a lot of these, but that would be very much worthwhile doing, finding some examples of him playing and also maybe some of his own pieces that he put together.

So there would be recordings, like CDs?

There are not. Oh no. He just missed all that and the computer. They were done on the old tapes.

Reel to reel somewhere?

They are. And also the small cassettes. In fact I've got a few of them, I must look them out. It's something that it would be wonderful to do, especially from the point of view of I think on those ones especially to the boys and to other pipers, like Iain MacFadyen and so many others, he actually did put down as much as he could and that was a lot of what Reid had taught him about the approach and the way to....

That would be good archive stuff, that

It would. Yes.

Andrew, thank you very much. It's been interesting about your uncle.

Thank you, Donny.