



## **NOTING THE TRADITION**

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



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**Interviewee**                      **Pipe Major William Hepburn Senior**

**Interviewer**                      **Angus MacKay**

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**This is Angus MacKay speaking with Bill Hepburn Senior for the Noting the Tradition Project on the 17<sup>th</sup> of February 2013. I'm in Glasgow and Bill is in Turriff. So, Bill, if I can start first of all by asking you to tell me a little bit about your earliest memories of piping and how you got into piping please?**

Well, my father started me off for a start when I was 11 years old. And then at 13 years old I went to Pipe Major James Robertson and he took me under his wing and taught me everything I know practically. He gave me a good grounding for a start. I've still got the books that he started me off on and his comments and everything. He was very interested in what I was doing. He did all my tuition for nothing and very probably I hadn't realised what I was being given at the time but now I do so.

**Can you describe a typical lesson with him?**

Oh well, he was a very strict man. He used to write a comment about my lessons every time you know and he started off by giving me all the scales and explaining everything, and writing out everything, all the music. Funny enough, it was quite similar to what's at the present day instruction, that was in 1943. He used to have all these comments about what you did at the practice you know and tried to help you, you know, like "more practice required", "unless you practice more you let me down" and things like that.

**Did you enjoy the lessons?**

I did, yes, very much, yes.

**What sort of music did he teach you at the beginning?**

He started me off and once I was through the scales in my first year, then do simple parts of tunes for a start, like Teribus, Earl of Mansfield, on to Kenmure's On and Awa' then moving on to a wee jig Cork Hill, Donald Dubh and Highland Laddie, tunes like these you know and then move on to harder 2/4s and bigger stuff.

**How long did you receive tuition from Pipe Major Robertson?**

I started in 1943. He died in 1961 which was eighteen years. I had the honour of playing at his graveside, so that was eighteen years.

**Then after Pipe Major Robertson, what was the next stage in your Piping development?**

Well between times, in 1948 I started going to Bob Brown in Balmoral and I went to him for twenty four years until he died in 1972, so I had actually Jimmy Robertson and Bob Brown both at the same time.

**What sort of tuition did Bob Brown give you?**

Mostly piobaireachd, yes, mostly piobaireachd. I just warmed up as they say with March, Strathspey and Reel and then go on to piobaireachd. I had the opportunity of hearing him play and hearing Bob Nicol play at the time. I didn't know the man so well as that but I used to go to Ballochbuie, which was the lodge that Bob Brown stayed in. I went there for lessons. It took five hours to get from Turriff up to Braemar at that time by bus and I stayed for a weekend and came back on Sunday night again.

**So, you had quite a commitment to going for the lessons, you really had to commit to it?**

Yes, it was very good. They looked after us well and kept nothing back, you know.

**I take it then if you were spending all that time with James Robertson, Bob Nicol and Bob Brown, how well did you get to know them and their individual piping styles?**

Very well, yes. They were all similar styles, you know. At Bob Brown's funeral, Bob Nicol came to me and he says "You've never been a pupil of mine?" and I said "No". He said "Well, would you

like to come to me?” and so I started going to Bob Nicol in 1972 until 1978, that was six years. We went through most of the tunes I had done with Bob Brown with some new ones added.

**What age were you when Bob Nicol approached you to give you tuition?**

That must have been 1972, I would have been forty two, yes.

**Ok,I mean so for a number of people who maybe don't know so much about piping, that listen to this they might think that that is quite an advanced age to still be getting tuition. What was it that you felt that you still needed to learn and that Bob Nicol could teach you?**

Well, I just thought Bob Nicol could impart the knowledge that was required. Bob Brown and Bob Nicol actually, piobaireachd was their main music you know. I just lived for piobaireachd and as I say they kept nothing back, they showed me everything and helped me as much as they could, went through the tunes as they got them from John MacDonald.

**Can you name some of the piobaireachd that they taught you?**

I remember some of them. The King's Taxes from Bob Brown, You're Welcome Ewen, ; Lament for Catherine; I am Proud to Play a Pipe; MacLeod's Short Tune; Too Long in this Condition; Lady Margaret MacDonald; Lament for Patrick Òg; The Big Spree; Donald Doughal MacKay, Praise of Marion, The Desperate Battle, The Vaunting; The Vaunting was a great favourite of Bob Nicol's; The Earl of Seaforth, Squinting Patrick, His Father's Lament for Donald Mackenzie and so on

**Very good, and what were your own priorities in terms of what you wanted to learn? Did you prefer playing piobaireachd or did you not have a preference for any particular style.**

Not a preference really but the piobaireachd getting it from these men was something that you just felt you obviously had to learn and wish you could do a job like they did of it.

**Do you feel that you did reach that level?**

Not their level, no.

**You don't think so?**

I tried hard but at the time maybe I didn't realise what I was actually getting from them you know. It took me a year or two to realise "God, this is good; I'm lucky to be getting this kind of stuff".

**I was just going to ask you can you tell me a little bit about the background of James Robertson, Bob Nicol and Bob Brown?**

Well, James Robertson, most of his life was in the Gordon Highlanders. He followed on as Pipe Major after G S MacLennan left the band and Jimmy Robertson took it over. That was his life, the Army, and then once he finished the Army he took a job as janitor in Banff Academy. He took a lot of piping pupils there besides me.

**Is that where you met him?**

Well, he took an interest in the Turriff Pipe Band. He was very friendly with my father and he used to come up and coach the band after the war, and then one thing led to another. I was told I had put down to him for tuition and he was just a lifelong friend of the family and he was very friendly with Bob Brown and Bob Nicol and one thing led to another; I was put up to Bob Brown for piobaireachd. Then, as I said, I went to Bob Nicol after that and things were similar, the tunes were much about the same from the three of them, you know.

**Bob Nicol and Bob Brown did they have a similar teaching style to James Robertson?**

More or less, they all thought the same, yes.

**Was there any difference in what they ultimately taught you, do you feel that one was able to give you knowledge of a particular area of piping?**

Well, maybe Bob Brown for piobaireachd. He concentrated more on his piobaireachd with me but Jimmy Robertson was on the course with John MacDonald, the Pipe Major's course at Inverness in 1912 and he had a lot of handwritten piobaireachd music done on the course. Now, to get up to the Bob Brown stage, he says you learn this, this is what you must learn he says, and it was the same music that Jimmy Robertson had been taught by John Macdonald and Bob Brown was very pleased when he saw this music all handwritten out. He told me to concentrate on that and the same when I went to Bob Nicol, he had the same ideas about the styles of music you know.

**Ok, then once you had started your tuition under Bob Brown, what were you doing at the time? Can you tell me about some of the competitions that you were taking part in?**

Mostly local games, all the Highland games in the area, anywhere I wanted to go and thought I would like to compete I just went. I met a lot of the pipers and had a good times. It was very interesting to get to know them all and see how they played; I just listened in you know and learned a lot off them.

**Where were the particular Highland games, can you give me the names of some of the games and occasions that you played at?**

Aboyne, Braemar, Lonach, Ballater, Nairn, just wherever there were Games. Sometimes it was difficult attempting to get around, not so easy at that time, but we got there and back usually.

**Did you ever compete at the Mod?**

Yes. I got second prize at the Mod.

**Can you tell me a little bit about that experience please?**

That was at Aviemore. I don't remember the exact date. Iain MacFadyen was first, I was second and John MacDougall was third. It was either Jimmy MacGregor, Willie Macdonald, Inverness, Benbecula was fourth or fifth, I can't remember the correct order.

**What do you think it was about your playing on that particular day that earned you such a high position?**

Well, it was march, strathspey and reel twice through, and I remember John MacLellan was one of the judges, Willie MacDonald, not Willie MacDonald and the third one, I forget the name now. John MacLellan came to me and he said, "You know, that's one of the hardest tasks you'll find twice through the march, strathspey and reel. He said "that's a very difficult competition to play twice through. It's a real test". I always remember that. So I was quite pleased getting second to Iain MacFadyen.

**Did you know as you were playing on that day, did you feel that it was going very well?**

I felt I was playing good, quite good, yes.

**What are the signals that allow you to know that you are playing well?**

I just felt at ease and I was getting a good tempo, getting a good swing about the march, good lift in the strathspey, not missing any gracenotes, just good finger work on the day and I was maybe lucky that I managed to do it.[laughter]

**Was there a celebration that night?**

Yes, quite a good celebration!

**What we've talked about so far is your own personal tuition and your participation in solo competition. Can we now go back to your early involvement with the Turriff Pipe Band and tell me a little bit, basically from the earliest days, about your involvement with the Turriff Pipe Band?**

Well, as I said, I started in 1943 to be able to play the bagpipes and my father was Pipe Major of the Home Guard Band at that time. He used to take me down to band practices and I'd practice along with the band. That sort of brought me into seeing what took place in a pipe band and then the War finished and the Turriff Pipe Band started up strong again so I became a member and have been ever since, until I retired as Pipe Major.

**Was it noticed from an early stage that you were a good player and that you had a talent that could be developed?**

Maybe, I don't know about that, but I used to do a good lot of playing, played at a lot of Highland dancing at the games and there always seemed to be plenty piping jobs on the go and, as I say, I started playing with the pipe band and just carried on all my life.

**What sort of, how much practice did you do when you were starting out, you know learning the chanter and progressing from there? How many hours a week did you tend to practice?**

I used to pick up the practice chanter at any time really. I always tried to have a good practice at some time every day and then tidy up anything I felt was needing looking at.

**There would have been a senior band I presume. Did you start...was there a youngsters' band, was that the first one you started with?**



Not at that time, no. It was just learners straight into the adult band. There were a lot of old soldiers at that time coming back from the War and they sort of looked after you well and tried to help you out.

**So you have good memories then of joining the band? What age were you when you actually first started playing in the adult band?**

I must have been about fifteen or sixteen.

**Ok, it sounds to me that they were very supportive of you and gave you encouragement, did you feel that?**

Yes, the older members encouraged the youngsters, yes.

**Can you remember any of the people who would have been supportive and encouraging at that time?**

There was Alex Burgess, Bob Gillespie, George Duthie, and Pipe Major Findlater, I didn't have many dealings with him. He was Pipe Major of the Turriff Pipe Band before my father took it over, Pipe Major Findlater VC. All the old hands helped the youngsters and there's a few of them still on the go yet that used to play along with me as a boy and there's one or two left going about yet.

**So what sort of influence did they have on you?**

On lifestyle like?

**Well, yes, lifestyle and piping?**

Well, they just tried to help out every time if they ever saw you doing anything wrong you know and tried to keep you in order, and drill movements and any help you needed playing- wise and just helped you to be a competent member of the Pipe Band.

**So, in some ways, maybe it is fair to say that having those older people set quite a high standard for the younger players to follow?**

Yes, oh yes.

**Can you tell me a little bit about your own progression from initially joining that Band through to your own leading of the Band?**

In 1950 I went to Nairn Games, and I competed there and I had got on the prize list and on the day Pipe Major Donald MacLeod was there. He approached me and he said “Are you due for National Service?” I said “Yes, I am” and he said “Well, if you land at Fort George contact me” and funny enough I landed at Fort George. That was in December 1950 and I made contact with Donald and I eventually landed in the pipe band at Fort George under Donald MacLeod. I stayed in his band for a year and a half and again it was very, very interesting and of great benefit to me hearing him play. You heard him play his pipes every day and just being with the man was a great experience.

**Can you tell me a little bit about your National Service experience as a piper? What sort of duties did you have as a piper at Fort George?**

Well, funnily enough, it’s hard to believe but the first engagement I did as a piper at Fort George, I played in the Officers’ Mess. I had a 48 hour pass and ??? bring back my own pipes, that was on Friday and I came back on Sunday night and he says “Get these tunes learned”, that was on the Monday and Tuesday he said I was going into the Officers’ Mess. Now at that time I knew nothing about the Officers’ Mess but I went in as instructed and did what I was told and I played there many times along with him. I did a lot of band engagements all over, up and down Scotland, just anywhere there was a pipe band required.

**So, you did your National Service you said there for a year and a half?**

The Gordon Highlanders Depot was at Bridge of Don and I was sent there as piper for another six months and that was me finished with National Service. There was a wee band for them there and we played at parades and there were six pipers and three drummers, a little band, just enough to do the job.

**Oh, I see, so you mean that was a band for ceremonies and other occasions that took place at Bridge of Don?**

Yes.

**Ok, some good times there, I presume?**

Yes, very good, aye.

**Then what happened, what was the next stage in your Piping career upon leaving national service?**

I went back to my trade as a joiner and carried on working and back to Turriff Pipe Band again. There were a lot of youngsters coming into the band at that time and they got taught again by James Robertson, a lot of them, with all the same style and the band improved greatly under my father and one thing and another led to the band being able to compete and we were travelling to a lot of contests all over Scotland.

**Ok, obviously your father was quite a driving force behind the band?**

Yes, he was.

**I take it then he wanted the band really to reach the highest levels that it could?**

He tried very hard, yes.

**How did he go about doing that? I mean he must have had to commit a lot of time and energy to it?**

He did, yes, he was Pipe Major and Secretary and just sort of ran the band at that time and a practice very week. He was always assured of good practices and there were a lot of good men in the band at the time which helped them out.

**Were there aspects of his personality that encouraged people and made them, he would have set the standard but was he the sort of person that people responded to and tried to improve because of his encouragement?**

Yes, at that time, yes.

**Where did the Band draw its members from, I mean, obviously Turriff, but were there any other places?**

Mostly Turriff and just the surrounding district and, as I say there was a lot of them were taught by James Robertson and from down the Banff area, and there has always a connection there and we were very lucky to get some good members. A lot of them, good men, passed on to different bands, and joined the Army and different things through life, joined the Police Pipe Bands.

**Your Dad was the head of the band and was it yourself that then succeeded him in that position?**

Yes, that's right.

**So, can you tell me a little bit about the process of taking over the band? I presume you were very familiar with everyone within the band but what else did you learn as you yourself then took over the leadership?**

It was more of a competing band and the members liked to go to contests and we tried to go to as many we could. Some days we had success and other days we hadn't but we won a Grade Three competition at Cowal but that year there were no bands promoted so they're still in Grade Three yet.

### **Why was there no promotion?**

There was no promotion that year in the bands.

### **Why was that?**

I don't know. There were just no bands promoted through the grades at all, so we just missed out.

### **Can you tell me a little bit about the preparation for a competition, you know, who picked the music and how generally would you prepare for a competition?**

It would have been myself that picked the music, it was discussed with the members and we used to see if they liked the tunes because if you don't like a tune, then you won't learn it very well and everything was discussed as a band and we got good help from Pipe Major David Duncan, Broxburn, and I was very friendly with John McAllister and Tom McAllister so they used to come up and help out. It was great to have them up at weekends for instruction and let the band members see what exactly was required from them.

### **Did they discuss with you maybe the music selection?**

Yes, and they gave good advice, you know, don't play that tune or play this one maybe, depends what they thought the style of tunes that was suiting the band and the drums and everything.

### **Can you give me an example of that, how would you decide which tune would suit the band on a given occasion? What were the factors that went into that decision?**

Just a really good stirring march. We used to play, I forgotten the tunes, we played, we played so many, Dugald MacColl's Farewell to France was one, that's terrible I have forgotten the names.

**That's ok, that doesn't matter. People can always look them up. It sounds like maybe decisions were discussed on a sort of committee basis almost with senior people?**

More or less.

**Very good, so then you would presumably tell the band what had been decided they would be playing at a competition?**

Exactly, yes.

**How long before the competition would you decide what they were playing and how much preparation time did you need for a competition?**

Well, if we decided to change a selection of the march, strathspey and reel, you usually try to get the tunes organised by the New Year and everybody getting them played by March or April, get them memorised, how they were sounding and see if they were capable of playing the tunes and we always tried to get them as well played and memorised as we could before we went to a contest.

**I suppose also you would then play that arrangement at all of the competitions during that summer?**

Mostly, yes.

**Were there ever any variations or did you have any last minute changes?**

Sometimes, depends what was happening, change for some reason. Sometimes we had to change, yes, do anything to try and win a prize [laughter].

**For what reason might you choose to change what you were playing?**

Well, maybe some of the pipers just weren't too sure themselves, sure of some tunes but not others; we tried to get the tunes familiar and see if they were capable of going away and playing what we decided.

**On the day of a competition itself, given how much experience you must have had by the time you were leading the band in competitions, were you able to tell whether the band would play well on a given day?**

Sometimes you thought you were playing good, the next day you knew you could play better but it was just a case of going down and getting the band formed up, tuned up and set up as well as you could and getting every member settled down and doing his job and that was it.

**How did you go about doing that? I take it different characters needed different types of encouragement in order to get the best out of them?**

Sometimes, yes. Some members need settling down more than others. I always had a band...I didn't like to drop, you know, you can drop people to try and win a prize but I didn't like to do that too much. I preferred them to play as good as they could and most of them tried their hardest when you think back. They worked hard, most of them. As I say, it's a funny thing but a lot of good pipers move on to different jobs and different areas, different bands and everything, you know, up in this area, we lose pipers every year, they move on, but you get used to that and you've got to laugh at it and you carry on.

**Did you then have to plan or maybe you knew that someone might be in the position of leaving and you would need to replace them?**

Exactly, yes. You always tried to get a youngster coming up through the ranks to fill his place. There was quite a lot of....

**It seems that you had to be thinking ahead?**

Yes.

**Who were the bands that you were principally competing against whilst you were the band leader?**

Many of the bands down in Fife, Dundee area, all the Aberdeenshire bands at the local contests, we went to the Worlds quite a lot, Cowal and we tried to go to all the major contests if the band was capable of playing there. Bit of encouragement for them to try and do something.

**Were there any local bands that you were frequently in competition with, were there any rivalries with any of the local bands at all?**

Broxburn, Aberdeen Police, they were a grade above us, Broxburn was in the first grade at the time, and Old Meldrum, Ellon Pipe Band, Culter Pipe Band, Deeside, they were all very friendly bands, various bands and we always liked a good contest against one another.

**Can you tell me a little bit about the social side? I presume it was quite a social life?**

[laughter] Once the job was done, aye, it was good. I met a lot of people, a lot of good friends yet in the piping world.

**So, you were competing and leading the band. When did you take up leadership of the band?**



1970 I think. My father retired in 1970.

**How long were you the band leader?**

Twenty years.

**Can you tell me a little bit then about your involvement with the band from when you stopped the actual band leader itself?**

Well, I just tried to help out as well as I could and still carried on teaching the youngsters and I managed to form a junior band and things like that.

**What is your kind of favourite involvement with the band now? Is it still playing or is it teaching?**

I don't play now. I go down and listen now and again and I just get enjoyment out of hearing them playing good stuff.

**So, you don't play the pipes?**

No, I haven't played for about a year now since I last played the bagpipes.

**What about the chanter?**

I play it regular every day, yes.

**What have you been playing in the last while? What music have you been playing recently on the chanter?**

Well, I took a liking to Glen Caladh Castle, I've been playing it lately, and the march, just anything that I think I like to play, I just sit down and play it.

**What about the band now, who is leading the band at the moment?**

My son took it over, he's Pipe Major now.

**How's he doing?**

He's doing a good job, yes. He's quite capable.

**Yes, and does he ever come to you for advice or anything?**

Now and again, yes.

**What do you think of the job he's doing then?**

Doing a very good job, yes, I don't interfere too much unless it's way out stuff they're playing.

**So occasionally there may be a slight difference of opinion about music choices?**

Not often, no. He still has got the same ideas as I have and selects the tunes to suit the Band. It's difficult at times to suit everyone.

**Of course, well, Bill, thank you very much for taking the time to speak to me. That was very interesting.**

