



NOTING THE TRADITION

An Oral History Project from the National Piping Centre



Supported by
The National Lottery[®]
through the Heritage Lottery Fund



Interviewee Donald John MacIntyre

Interviewer Josie Burgess

Date of Interview 10th April 2012

TRANSLATION

This interview is copyright of the National Piping Centre

Please refer to the Noting the Tradition Project Manager at the National Piping Centre, prior to any broadcast of or publication from this document.

**Project Manager
Noting The Tradition
The National Piping Centre
30-34 McPhater Street
Glasgow
G4 0HW
jbeaton@thepipingcentre.co.uk**

We are here in Inverness and Donald John MacIntyre is along with me. Donald John, tell me when you yourself started on the bagpipes or on the chanter.

Well, I started on the chanter when I was nine years of age. I used to, when I was younger than that, I used to sit on my father's knee and listen to my father playing the chanter, and I had a great interest in his playing, and when my fingers were long enough to go on the chanter, I started learning. I would say, just about nine years of age.

And who was your father?

My father is Donald, son of Kenneth, son of Calum, and he himself was a good piper, he was in the Camerons during the war, and he learned piping, as did a great many of the Uist pipers. He played the pipes on the other shoulder, and he as quite famous because of that, as they say in English he was "a right shoulder player", but my father as I said, he was in the Camerons, and he was very good at piping, especially at least at playing for dancing. So anyway, I used to listen to him playing the chanter, and it was seldom that he played the pipes, but when he played, I would often be behind the door listening to him, and for that reason I had a great interest when I began to learn myself.

Yes. And did your father compete – would he go to the games?

He wasn't a great man for going to competitions, he was much fonder of just playing at ceilidhs in the house, or at weddings and things like that, as well he was Pipe Major of the 4/5th Camerons TA, that was after the war. Unfortunately, during the war, he was captured at St Valery and he was five years in prison in Germany, and for that reason he lost almost five years of piping. So, I think that when he returned home to Uist after being in prison that he was happy that he got to return to piping and thus I think that if he got the chance to play the bagpipe, he would take that chance.

And where in Uist did you live when you were little?

We lived in, my mother and father's house was in North Boisdale, and that is where I was brought up, and I must say that there was a lot of music in our family, by father played the pipes, and my sisters sang, and one of brothers did a bit of singing. So, there was always, when I was young I remember we had many ceilidhs in the house, people used to come to the house from some distance, and there would be songs and piping and lots of entertainment. So, there was a lot of music around me when I was young and thus I was so keen on learning the chanter.

Yes. You said you had brothers. How many did you have?

I had three brothers, and my father was very keen that one of them would play and he tried to get my eldest brother, Kenneth, started, he was keen that Kenneth should play the pipes, but Kenneth wasn't interested in piping at all, he was more interested in football. My other brothers, Alasdair and Ruairidh, they were keen on music, but they weren't so keen as to learn; they did not have much patience at all. So I think that I was the youngest in the family, and my father made the greatest effort to get me to play the chanter and quite often when I would come home from the school, when I went out to play football, he would make me play a tune on the chanter, or when I started on the pipes, he would make me play, and then go out to play football.

So, he taught you in the first instance, did he?

He did without doubt, it was he who taught me right at the beginning, but then in the school I used to get tuition from Pipe Major, Roddy Alan Gillies, Roddy Gillies. He taught in the primary schools and in the secondaries, and I used to get piping twice a week for an hour in the school, but I would say that the most instruction that I got, particularly in light music, my father was very fond of light music,

was from my father. Roddy Alan Gillies used to teach me piobaireachd, and once or twice I went to see a quite famous piper who lived in Dalabrog, Seonaidh Roidean (John MacDonald). I went to him a couple of times, I used to go to him maybe just before the games, just to get a little bit further instruction. But, as for the greater part of my tuition, I was fortunate that my father was there to give me that.

Do you remember the first tune you played on the chanter?

I do indeed, and it's a tune that I play to this very day, and that is "Leaving Port Askaig" and I remember that there's a recording of me somewhere trying to play it...well there were two tunes I was learning about the same time, I was fond...I used to play to myself on the chanter "The Earl of Mansfield's March" and there is a recording somewhere of me trying to play it on the chanter and I have to say that I did not make a good job of it, but those are the first two tunes I learned. My father was fond of marches, and for that reason these were the sort of tunes I got at the start. Fairly easy tunes I have to say – I started on easy tunes, and then when I got a bit better he would give me more difficult ones after that.

Was by listening to your father that you learned, or did you get it on paper? How did you learn the tunes?

I have to say, I have to confess, that that was the one thing I had to learn when I left Uist when I was seventeen and when I joined the Army, I went to the Queen's Own Highlanders. It was my father almost – as they say "by ear" I learnt the tunes, I used to look at his fingers for a bit and listen to him. Although he used to want me to keep an eye on the book and to look at the notes in the book, I used to listen to him and I get the tune from that quite well and he used to correct me if I left out something, but it was when I went to the Army that I began to read the tunes from the book, and that was quite difficult for me at the outset.

And Mr Gillies, with the piobaireachd, he was teaching through the notes on the paper, or was he the same thing?

Yes was, I learnt a little then but I must say, I remember the first time I saw the “Kilberry Book”, the name of the Kilberry Book of Pibroch, and it frightened me a lot, looking at the long tunes there, and I said to myself I would never learn them.

What age were you at that time?

I think I was probably thirteen when I started learning piobaireachd at first, but we only learnt a tune here and there, we didn’t learn a lot. And I think the first tune I got from Roddy Gillies as far as piobaireachd was concerned was “The Wee Spree”. And it took a long time for me to learn it I have to say, because my father was not fond of piobaireachd, any more than I was.

And what about the first bagpipe that you got? Where did you get it, do you remember? When did you get it?

That is a good question. I think that the difficulty that I had, my father had a bagpipe, but the difficulty that I had with my father’s bagpipe was that he played on the other shoulder, and so, if I was wanting a shot of his pipes, he had to change the big drone from one side to the other. So, I did not play my father’s bagpipe that often, but fortunately, I won a bagpipe in a competition when I was fourteen or fifteen. They were the Finlay MacKenzie pipes, he was a man who had the Loch Boisdale Hotel, and when he died, he left money to get a bagpipe for the best player in the Uists every year, and whoever was the best piper, he would get a bagpipe, and so I got the Finlay MacKenzie pipes, and I got them when I was about fourteen, I would say.

And do you remember what sort of bagpipe it was?

I do indeed, they were Hardies, and I kept them – they were quite hard to keep going and we need to remember that in the Uists at least, it was very difficult to get good reeds and bags or anything at all for the pipe because we were living on an island. So it was a bit difficult, and the one thing I would say is, although I was doing a lot of piping, I would say that at that time my bagpipe was not going so well because of the difficulties we had in getting reeds, but they were Hardies, and I remember still that the bagpipes my father had were Hendersons.

And did he have them during the war?

He had them during the war, and there was a story that those pipes were hidden during the war, and then they surfaced again after the war, when the Germans came across them at St Valery, they kept their pipes to one side until they were able to hide them so that they Germans would not find them. I am not so sure that that is the truth, but when I was young, I was not bothered where the pipes I had came from, but just played them.

And did he come back with that bagpipe?

Well the story was that it was the same bagpipe, but I am not sure that it was, and one thing about it, it was a good bagpipe and it is still going to this day.

And where is it now?

I have it now, it is my bagpipe.

And you were saying that it was difficult to get things for the bagpipe, where did you get the drones and the reeds?

The bulk of them, I think at that time, we got them through the school, through the piping teacher, Roddy Alan Gillies, he got lots from the bands in Glasgow, they would be getting reeds home, and I remember, I sort of remember their shop, I think it was Grainger and

Campbell, that it was the one my father used for getting stuff for seasoning the bag and things like that, and as I was saying, it was very difficult to get good folk in Glasgow and I think that the folk who were in the shop would just put anything in the packet to send us. My father was very good at setting up pipes and keeping them going and so it was good that I had support at home which some of the other pipers did not have.

You were speaking about getting stuff through the school, which school were you speaking about?

I started on the chanter at the beginning in Garrymony school but then I went to Daliburgh School and it was in Daliburgh School that I started getting a little more instruction during the week and also, there I started – I said to myself and Roddy Alan Gilles himself said that I had the opportunity if I kept going that I would be a good piper yet. Some of the boys who started with me were falling to one side and they did not keep going, they had an interest in football perhaps, but he used to say to me, and my father as well, and the whole family when I was playing them in the house, they enjoyed that and they said “If you keep going you will make a good piper some day” and they spoke the truth.

And who were the other boys who were the same age as you who played? Are any of them playing now, or were any of them good?

I remember playing in the competitions like the Flora MacDonald at that time in Uist and at the mods, and there were lots of young lads and girls who were really, really good. I think that what happened was that when they came to the to be working after leaving the school, there were lots of them, when they started work, that they didn't have the opportunity to do much piping. So, I was lucky that I went to the Army, and I was a piper in the Army, in the Queen's Own, and thus I had the chance almost every day to be piping, although you did a lot of soldiering as well. But I remember young lads who were really,

really good, I used to go to the competitions with them quite often, when I would only get the third or fourth prize, like Angus MacKinnon from Loch Boisdale, there was another one, Angus Peter, Angus Morrison from Taobh a' Chaolais, there was also his sister Mairi, who played. There was another one from Kilpheadar, John Angus Morrison, he was really good. Alec MacIntyre from Kilpheadar. There was some of them from Benbecula also who were really, really good at that time, folk like the MacPhersons, Iain MacPherson and Alasdair MacPherson, both of them were very good, and the McLennans, there was one Murdo McLennan and his brother Ronald, they were really good. A friend of my own, who still plays with me in the band, James Craib from Benbecula, he was a good player. So there were plenty of young pipers with good fingers, but the one thing, I think the one problem that they had perhaps is that our pipes were not as good as the pipes of today.

Indeed. And what about the competitions in Uist, how many were there and where were they?

There were competitions, perhaps not the amount that there ought to have been, as I said there was the Flora MacDonald, we were there perhaps at the start of the year, February or March, and then you had the mods, perhaps in May and then a big day – the day of the Games, that was the day that I enjoyed, not only because you yourself were playing the competition, but you were also seeing the excellent players who came from the mainland. And I remember still as a young boy listening to men such as John MacDougall and Norman Gillies and Robert Wallace and people like that, I would listen to the piping throughout the day and say “Someday I will be up on that platform there playing against them, I hope”. But over and above that I think that there was another competition at that time; a piping competition, I think it was the Benbecula Piping Society, that we went to as well, but over and above that I went to the mainland seldom and that was for the National Mod. The first National Mod I went to was

in Oban, and I played in the under fifteens and I have to say I played very well, I got the third prize for the under fifteens and I remember yet that the one who got the first prize was Alasdair Gillies, he got the first prize and I remember listening to him that day and he was just like a god to me he played so well, and how good his bagpipe was.

What year was that, do you remember?

I think it was '79. Aye, '79 I would say it was. And then, I think the year after that I went to Stornoway to the mod and that time I also played well in the under fifteens and I remember who got third, a I was third equal with her, that was Mairi Morrison from Taobh a' Chaolais, she was with me in third place. And the one who won that day, I do not know if he is still piping, that was one Ivor MacKenzie, he got the first prize, and in the seniors it was Gillies who won the prize and one from Oban, Neil Johnstone who won the under eighteens.

And do you remember the tunes you played, was it a march, strathspey and reel or was there more than one competition?

In the under fifteens you just played a march, and the one I played in Oban, this is off the top of my head, I am getting old now, it was Millbank Cottage. And in Stornoway, I played Stirlingshire Militia. And I remember the judge I had in Stornoway was the late Finlay MacNeill, he was there and he enjoyed my playing. It was another world then, I was absolutely delighted I won these prizes, I was so proud.

And did any of the family go with you to the competitions, or did you go on your own?

When I went to Oban my father went with me and Pipe Major Roddy Gillies, he went as well, and my brother Alasdair was there as well to support me, I don't know what support he gave me, but he was there anyway. I remember how proud my father was after I won the prize

and I remember we went out for dinner after the business and we had a great occasion because of my having won that prize. But when I went to Stornoway I just think I went up myself, I think that is what I did.

Very good. So the Mod, as it were, would be the biggest competition that you played at?

That was the biggest competition I would say at which I played – that I went to at that time – until I went to the Army, and I started then doing bigger competitions, and I had to go to the mainland to play at those competitions. I enjoyed doing that.

Very good. So, tell me about the Army, when did you start in the Army?

I went to the Army just when I was seventeen years of age, just a little over seventeen – when I left the school I was working for folk who built houses, and I was an apprentice bricklayer, but I was working with cement and concrete and it was destroying my fingers, and I have to say that my piping was suffering and my father was at least, because he was a soldier himself and my brother Kenneth, he was in the Army at that time. My father wanted me to go and be a piper in the Army and one day I was working outside at the Loch Boisdale crofters, I was working with the team, and I saw the Army Landrover and I went after them, and I stopped them and I said to them “I want to join the Army”, and it was Pipe Major Andy Venters and he said to me, “Oh, what’s your name?” And I told him and he said, “Are you related to Donald MacIntyre” and I said, “I am his boy” and he said “Oh, so you’ll be a piper?” And I said “Yes” and he took a chanter from the back of the Landrover and he said, “Play me a tune” and I remember it yet, I played Ballochyle for him and he said “Right my boy, you are coming to the Army, you’re going to the Queen’s Own” and at the end of six months I went to the Army, and for the first – I would say, six months the Army was quite hard, because you were

training to be a soldier and there was no mention at all of piping. And I went through my training in Edinburgh but then after my training I went to the regiment, but you had to do six months in the regiment before you got a chance to go into the pipe band but after six months I got the opportunity to go to the pipe band and again, there were men, pipers there who were tremendously good at piping and I learnt such a lot from these pipers and my father was very happy and proud that I went to the Army.

And who were the pipers who were along with you, who was in charge...?

The pipe major that we had at that time was a man called Nicky Cordon, I think that he is now teaching in Lewis in the schools, but there were other famous pipers there, Alasdair Gillies himself, from Ullapool, he was in the pipe band. Another was the late Roddy McCourt, he was a great piper. And there were other ones, there was a Sergeant we had in the band who was really, really good at every sort of instrument, his name was Ally Reece, he wrote quite a famous tune “Raigmore”, it was he who wrote “Raigmore”. So there were folk like that there and I looked up to these folk and I learned from them; anyway, as far as the bagpipe was concerned, that was the biggest thing, they showed me how to sort the bagpipe and how I would get a good sound out of the bagpipe, and so I learned a great deal from those folk.

And were there any other lads from Uist who joined at the same time as you, or were there other pipers from Uist?

No, well there was a piper from Garryhelly, Archie Lindsay, he was in the same band and when I went to the band at first, Archie was very supportive, looking after me, because I was only a young lad from Uist, and he had been in the Army for a long time, so he knew a lot about the Army. But there was another boy, my friend from Benbecula, Jimmy Craib, and he himself was very supportive to me

and I learnt a lot from them, but there weren't many others, there was another boy from Benbecula, Iain MacDonald and he was a good piper, and it was quite funny sometimes in the band, when we used to speak Gaelic to each other when we wanted to say something that we did not want the others to hear, that was quite interesting. I have to say that the band, we had over twenty four pipers in the band at that time, the band was quite strong, you had to play well, I think, if you were not playing well, you would not get the chance to stay in the band.

Now, you spoke to me about Archie Lindsay, am I right in thinking that he wrote a tune which is played quite often nowadays “The Skylark’s Ascension”, do you know anything about that tune? Do you play it?

I used to play it as it is a very good tune and lots of people are very fond of it. I am not entirely sure of the history, but Archie wrote two or three other tunes which were very good, but I know that “Skylark’s Ascension” is very good, people in bands play it often as well as solo pipers and I also like another tune that Archie wrote “Lindsay’s Lament” it is a marvellously good tune also. And this is another thing that Archie was good at as well, he was good at teaching. As well as writing tunes, he was very good at teaching, especially people who were right at the start of the chanter. And that was the work he had while in the band, he looked after the youngsters, the learners, as they say. He was really good at that, and I like that tune, Skylark’s Ascension, it is very good.

Did you father know him, did they used to play together?

I remember my father used to look forward when we went home on holiday, what they called leave in the Army. When Archie went home he would come up to see my father, and certainly he would have a bottle or two, and when they had a dram or two, they would then start the piping, and anyway Archie, he used to get the pipe out and then

they would be talking about tunes and I think that that is the thing, they would always be talking about old tunes, did you hear this tune, did you hear the other tune. I remember a couple of times, Andy Venters himself came, he was over in Uist and one summer I remember anyway, we were over working at the hay, over on the headland yonder at the houses and this Landrover came with the horn going and my father and my mother, and I think my brothers and one of my sisters we were working at the hay and the next thing we heard shouting from the other side of the road and he had come home he was over for the holidays and my father was very pleased that he could leave the hay and go over and start on the piping and probably stories and tunes and things like that.

And speaking of your father, do you remember his favourite tune, was there a tune that he was really fond of?

I am sure that as far as marches were concerned the that he was very very fond of was Captain Carswell, it was always Captain Carswell, he liked Captain Carswell, but I remember a jig as well and he used to play it, at least when he got older sometimes he sat by the fire and started to try, he knew that his fingers had grown too old, but anyway he used to play the first two parts of “The Shaggy Grey Buck” and those who know the tune, know that it is a very difficult tune, I don’t remember how many parts it has, but he started playing “The Shaggy Grey Buck” and I remember him saying to me when I started going about the competitions (I was doing very well at the competitions) he used to ask me “Oh will you be playing “The Shaggy Grey Buck””, but I used to say to him, “Oh, it’s too long, it’s too long, I will stick with tunes that have four parts, which are easier.”

Did you ever learn it?

No, never, but I have heard two or three playing it. I heard someone playing it at a Highland games two or three years ago, a famous piper who is from Tain, Duncan MacGillivray he is called, I heard him

playing it at the Highland games and he made a really good job of it and he won that day. But I think the reason he won was that there are so many parts in it, and although he made little mistakes here and there the judge gave him the prize because it is such a big tune.

Do you know who wrote it?

Off the top of my head no. But just to return to one of the other tunes that my father was fond of, there was another one he was fond of “Ballochyle”, he liked “Ballochyle” and I have to say that I like that tune myself. And also, the strathspeys and little reels for dancing, he was very very fond of them.

And when he would play for dancers, was it at the Games or just at ceilidhs...?

He would quite often be at ceilidhs and at weddings as well, I remember that he was very fond of playing at weddings but also in the house, I remember when we had ceilidhs in the house, and it was so strange for me to see him, - he was a small man – and it was so strange for me to see him with his pipe on the other shoulder and the pipers of Uist, South Uist anyway, are famous for that, such as Roddy Roidein the brother of Seonaidh Roidein, he played on the other shoulder and plenty of other pipers, such as Rona Lightfoot, Rona MacDonald, she plays on the other shoulder (as far as I remember), so there were such famous pipers and they played off the left shoulder.

And why was that, do you know at all where it came from, playing on the other shoulder?

Well I think it was because they were “cearrag” as my father called the left hand, and if they were left handed that was the reason their fingers were the other way round on the chanter and so it was more comfortable for the bag, for the bag to be under the other arm rather than the usual arm, but it is quite strange.

What did you father call it?

I think it was “cearrag”, I think that is the name he had for it, as he would say...

The left hand.

The left hand – “a’ chearrag” that is what he used to say. I remember him once saying “You need to be well behaved of you will get this “cearrag” at the back of your head”. That was the word, that was exactly the word he had for it, I don’t know where that word came from, quite funny.

Very good. Turning back, you were in the army, you were saying you were training for about six months – were you near the pipes in those six months? Did you have any time to play it, or were you too busy?

Oh, the greatest part of the time, I was too busy, we were just outside training all the time. You used to be at work at seven o clock in the morning until eleven o clock at night, but I remember one time I played the pipes in all that time, it was a time when we were on exercise out in the woods, and this officer ordered me, we were doing what was called “final attack” and this officer ordered me, he said “Well, we are going to do this attack as they did in the Great War. Come on MacIntyre, come on and get your bagpipes”. And I had to get my bagpipes and play in front of the soldiers who were going forward. And, I remember the soldiers who were with me saying, you know that was really good, it gave them great encouragement to be going forward behind the bagpipes. But I have to say, I would not have been too happy at all in wartime to have been a piper the first man to come out of the trenches as they used to say, because I would not have felt too safe then, but the other soldiers were pleased with the bagpipe. And once the soldiers knew that I was a piper, when it came to the weekend and we were off, and we could go to the NAAFI

or that, people used to take a pint or two and say, “Oh come on and get your pipes, give us a tune on the pipes.” But I didn’t play very often because I was so busy training and learning to be a soldier.

And where were you when you moved to the mainland to the Army, where was your base?

At the start I was in Edinburgh, in a place called Penicuik, Penicuik Barracks, and we did twenty weeks – well twenty two weeks altogether, training to be a soldier, and then you got a fortnight off and then you went to your regiment, you trained at the beginning and then you went to your regiment, and our regiment at that time, they were down in England, in a place called Tidworth, and I was there for six months, and then an order came that our entire regiment was going over to Ireland, to Belfast for two years. I left England then and went to Belfast for two years.

Did you take your pipes with you?

I did yes, we did a little bit of piping in Ireland, just here and there, not a lot, but at that time in the Eighties, Ireland was quite dangerous, that’s how it was, and so we did not get much piping, we used to come back to Scotland now and again to compete at the Highland games, things like that, but the greatest part of the time we were over on the streets of Belfast.

Right. And then, what happened after Belfast?

Then we came over to Inverness, to Fort George, over in Inverness and we were there for two years, so we started doing a lot of piping there as a band, playing together and going to competitions, and also, when I was in Fort George, I got the opportunity to go on the Pipe Major’s course at the Castle, in Edinburgh, and that is the biggest course you do in the Army, and at that time it was the best course for pipers anywhere. You would be at the Castle for six months and getting instruction in writing, piobaireachd, history of the bagpipe, oh

– just everything. And you got an exam at the end of the six months and if you were good enough you got a certificate saying that you were a pipe major.

And were you good enough then?

Yes, and these were the best six months I had in my life in the Army. We lived in the Castle itself and it was, as they would say, a good “chat up line” when you were down in the town, if someone asked you. “Where do you live?” you would say, “Oh, I live in the Castle, do you want to come and see my castle?” But it was really, really good. I have to say that the two teachers that I had very especially good at teaching. The first one, that is Major John Allan, he taught me piobaireachd most of the time, and the other one who taught us about light music and how you kept your pipe going, he was a famous piper, Gavin Stoddart, he was very knowledgeable and I learned a lot from him.

And what about tunes – do you remember the piobaireachd pieces you did?

I think I remember every one of them. You had to learn six over the duration of the course and you had to have memorised six for the end of the course, but I learned, I think up to ten or twelve. I was very good once I got control of how you learned and how you kept them in your head, I was very good at learning piobaireachd and tunes. At the end of the course you had to play a tune for your exam and the tune I got out of the six was “The Lament for the Earl of Antrim”. And I played that on the day of the exam and you then had to play a march, strathspey and reel, and two or three 6/8s and a jig. But, I was also fond of “Lament for the Earl of Antrim” because that was the same year that I went to Skye and I got the Dunvegan Medal playing that tune, I was very proud of that.

Indeed. And what about marches and other things; was it traditional type marches that you learned in the Army?

There was a variety. You had to learn tunes for playing for dancing. You had to learn these tunes and in a way, because I was going round the competitions, they gave me more pleasure, than the tunes I used to learn to play at competitions, I am afraid. So, I had a lot of time, and I would not say that the other pipers who were on the course were not as good as me, but they had a little more work done on them, so I had plenty of time for myself, and I learned I am sure, ten or twelve new marches during the time I was there. Some of them I play to this day, some of them I don't play. And the one thing I would say about the strathspeys and reels is that I learned lots of them in that seven months, and you used to sit in the piping school from nine o' clock to four o' clock and you had the time, if you wanted to use the time in the right way, to play at the end of the course – I played as well then as I have ever played when I was finished with the course.

And what bagpipe did you have when you went to the Army, was it the same pipe as you had in Uist?

No. The bagpipe I took with me to the Army, - the Finlay MacKenzie pipes – was a bagpipe which I won, but after a short time, I don't know if it was the reeds I was getting, the new reeds which were coming out, they were no use in that bagpipe, so at last the thing that happened was that I got clear of that bagpipe and I bought another, and the ones I bought were silver and ivory Hendersons, and I had them when I was on the course. And I also had my father's bagpipe. But I have to say, I decided when the course was over, I had noticed during the course, that it was my father's bagpipe that was better than the other bagpipe, so I kept that.

And what happened to the other bagpipes, the Finlay MacKenzie's?

The Finlay MacKenzie's, I sold them to someone, and it was quite – I was not happy that I had to sell them, but what was wrong was that the big drone on the bagpipe was squint, and it couldn't be straightened, and I only sold it to someone who was learning the pipes, so that person was not going to use them in competitions, so it was only a bagpipe which would be useful to someone who was learning.

And how did that happen?

I think that it was the wood itself; the wood was squint, the bore, as they say in the drone itself, it was a bit squint, so it was the bagpipe itself that caused it

And you bought Henderson's

Silver and ivory Hendersons, I bought them, they belonged to a man who had a shop here in Inverness, it was a kilt shop, Hector Russell in Inverness, and there was a man there who had a bagpipe, and he wasn't playing it and he said to me one day, "Will you come in and have a look at them?" I went in and had a look and I played them and I was pleased with them, but the one thing that was wrong with them compared to my father's bagpipes was when you played them, they got wet quite quickly. I don't know if it was the sort of wood they were made of, but because of that when you were playing piobaireachd they went a bit out of tune, so I stuck with my father's bagpipe.

And were they old, these pipes? Was there a history behind them?

They were quite old, I think they were made round about twenty six, they were quite old, and that was the other thing I noticed about them, bits of the drones, they were starting, as they say, cracks were appearing in them, and I put stuff into them, glue, to stop that, but anyway in the summer they opened again, and for that reason, I think I got rid of them at the right time.

And where did they go?

They went to Orkney, those pipes went to a man who was from Orkney, a man who was playing in a band, and it is not that long since I saw him, and he still has them, he still has them going..

And you father's bagpipes, where did these pipes come from, do you know?

I am not exactly sure, I remember asking him when I was back from the army once, and I suspect that they came from the army itself, and he said he was not certain where they came from , but I think at that time they were getting pipes from the army itself, or perhaps, what he meant was that he got the bagpipes from someone who was with him in the army, but what I remember was that he said they came from the army, but possibly from a friend of his.

So after you finished in Edinburgh, what happened after that?

Well, after I finished in Edinburgh, I went to Germany, I was in Germany for three years, and in the middle of that I got married, and then I got work, after three years in Germany, teaching young soldiers in the camp in Edinburgh again, I was a teacher for two years. That was very good, because the others who were teaching with me were famous pipers, well one of them was the most famous piper ever, Gordon Walker, he was along with me in the same class, he and I used to teach young soldiers. Again, those two years were very good, because I got about the competitions, winning prizes and gaining knowledge about how I should be looking after the bagpipe, and it was excellent altogether to be going about the Highland games.

And when you were in Germany, were you still playing as often as you used to?

Yes, I have to say we had lots of opportunities in Germany – the Germans are so fond of the bagpipe and every weekend, if you

wanted to you could play at a wedding or at a party or at anything else, as I say in Germany they called the bagpipe the “dudelsack” and you could every weekend...the pipe major used to come in and say “who of you wants to work this weekend, is anyone for going to Berlin or over there, someone is wanting a piper.” And I remember, we put an advert in the paper, we were in Munster, we put an advert in the paper in Munster itself once, and in a way it was a mistake, telling the people of that town that there was an opportunity for them to learn the “dudelsack” if they turned up on a Wednesday evening at our camp there, and I still remember that night, we went to the gates and our Provost Sergeant was angry because almost 200 people turned up at the gate wanting to learn piping. We had to go in, and the first night it was really stupid to try and say that we could teach 200. So what we did was we split them up, and we said we couldn’t...there were some of them, for example I had a man the first night that I was teaching, and his job was driving trains and he was sixty five years old and his hands were like big shovels and he couldn’t get his fingers on the chanter holes, unfortunately I had to tell him “I am sorry but...it is not going to happen”. So we got clear of about a hundred the first night but it was a big mistake indeed. One thing about them; they were so keen to learn and they were happy for payment to be taken from them, “Oh I am happy to pay for it”, they were very much for being pipers.

And after Germany, were you teaching?

I was teaching in Germany and then I went to Germany for a just a year but then fortunately our regiment came back to Edinburgh and myself and my wife returned over to Edinburgh and when we were in Edinburgh we did a lot of piping, we were in Dreghorn Barracks, and we did a lot of piping then. But we got, we got a bit of a knock when we were told, that ourselves, the Queen’s Own Highlanders and the Gordon Highlanders, that the two regiments had to come together. That meant that the two pipe bands would come together and that

some of the pipers and the drummers would have to leave and perhaps work only as soldiers, that was quite a difficult time. We had to see which tartan we were going to keep, our tartan or the Gordon's tartan. Which cover was going to be on our bags, which ribbons were going to be on the pipes, just everything, but we did the business and then they changed the name as well: in the place of the Queen's Own Highlanders or the Gordon Highlanders, the Highlanders was the name they gave the regiment.

And you were speaking about tartan – what tartan did you have?

Well, fortunately in the pipe band we kept the Camerons' tartan, but the regular soldiers, they kept the Gordons' tartan, just for their kilts. So I was happy as a piper to keep the tartan that my father had.

Very good. And what about when you started competing at a young age, did you wear a kilt?

No. When I played at the Highland Games down on the Askernish machair, unfortunately the family did not have a lot of money at that time and I was happy enough to be piping, but I still remember playing, and I think that one of my sisters still has a photograph somewhere, playing on Askernish machair in red corduroy trousers and a red jumper. But after that, as I was saying I was just happy to be piping, but I don't think I had a kilt until I went to the Army, and that was the first kilt I got. But, as I say, it made no difference to my piping but I am happy to say after that, that I had a kilt on every time.

And what about the other boys, the young boys like yourself...did any of them have kilts?

There were some of them here and there who wore, what they called the whole "rig out", I remember some who did not and even adults, I remember seeing people up on the platform at the Flora MacDonald and at the Highland Games wearing only trousers and a shirt. So not everybody had a kilt. And it is interesting for me, I understand – I

myself judge at competitions and it is in the rules that you must wear a kilt and a shirt and tie, a jacket and hat as, although we let them off if they do not wear a hat.

The rules were not so strict in Uist – it is just Uist you are thinking of, or Scotland as a whole?

I have seen pictures from other places, perhaps old pictures from fifty years or so ago and you would see people playing at Highland games, and I think that they would let them if they did not have kilts, that they could go up on the platform, but we got off with in Uist anyway.

And what about your father, did he have a kilt?

He had a kilt and I used to see his kilt at Christmas when we had to go up to the loft for the decorations, to get the decorations down. And you would come up to the loft and in an old suitcase up in the loft was his Camerons kilt, which he had in the army. It was a really old kilt, and I think that the moths had put holes in it and everything else. But the other time I used to see that kilt coming out, it was – my sisters and perhaps my brothers used to put on that kilt at Halloween, they used to go out at Halloween. So that was when we saw the kilt, but he also had a jacket, a jacket, as they say “a number two dress jacket” which was up in the loft that we used to see but I have seen pictures of it, and there is quite a famous picture with my father speaking to the Queen at Lochboisdale quay, and I have to say he was looking very, very smart.

Why was the Queen in Uist?

She was up for a visit in Uist, just after, as they say, her coronation, aye, I think it was about fifty two or about then, I am not very good with dates, but there is a picture of the TA standing at Lochboisdale pier and my father is in it, and he was the Pipe Major of the 4/5th Camerons TA at that time and he was standing with his pipes and the Queen speaking to him. And I have to say that that picture, quite

proudly, and people still say to me that I am a bit like him when I am standing with the kilt and the whole rig out on, and other people to say to me that my lad is quite like my father when they see that picture.

And was your father well known as a good piper in Uist or was he a bit shy about playing a bit in the house?

That is right. I think he was shy. He himself used to think that he was good enough to play at weddings and at ceilidhs and in the house, but actually he was quite shy about going out and playing at competitions. There were folk who were brasher than him, and I used to ask him why he didn't play at the Flora and things like that. There were two things that bothered him, the first thing was that he did not get enough time, because he was a crofter and he worked quite hard on the croft, and he did not get enough time to play the pipes as he ought to, and above that, he was growing older also and so he was always saying "Well, I am for leaving piping to the young folk."

When did he stop playing?

It is difficult for me to say, I think when he got – he had stopped before I went to the Army. I think that when I started playing the bagpipes more often, perhaps about twelve years of age, because we had to take the drones out and put them on the other shoulder, he said himself "Well, that's it, I will leave it to the young folk. I would say he stopped, I don't what age he would be at that time but I was about thirteen. I think that it was then that he stopped. But he used to still, from time to time he used to say to me, "Oh well, you are playing that tune a bit fast" or "You made a mistake there" and he would show me on the chanter. He was still supporting me.

Did you know you were getting the bagpipe from him – did he say to you that the bagpipe was yours...or did you know that you had it?

I did indeed and at any rate when I went to the Army, when I had won that bagpipe, the Finlay MacKenzie, he knew that I was not so happy with that bagpipe, and he knew himself that that bagpipe was not as good as it ought to be perhaps. So he knew that one day he would give away his own bagpipe and he was not bothered about that. The one thing that bothered him at the outset when I went to the Army at first he wanted to see that I would get the training out of the way and that I would get the regiment at first and then once I had been in the regiment for about a year and knew how things were going and that I would look after it, he was happy enough then to give it to me.

Very good. And going back to your time in the Army, the Highlanders came and what happened after that then?

Things were a bit difficult for a year or two but luckily I got sent up to Inverness to work, looking for young soldiers, the “recruitment team” they called it. And the work that I had was looking for young soldiers but particularly bringing young pipers into the Army. I was in the recruitment team for almost three years. And I enjoyed that a lot, and I was running a pipe band, they were called the Cadets, the Queen’s Own Highlanders’ Cadets. And the young lads – and girls – who were in that band were very, very good and they were so skilled at piping and playing the drums as well. So I was quite lucky; I had boys from the Isle of Skye, Thurso, Nairn, Inverness itself. There were young boys coming from Uist to play in the Cadets. And I have to say, the three years I was running the cadets, I was very happy and our band was very, very good. And the thing it gave as well, it gave me the chance to go around the Highland games every weekend in the summer, I used to play at the Highland Games. So again, I had the chance to get my pipes going well and my fingers were going well also. I got lots of prizes and I was very pleased with that.

What was the biggest prize you ever won in your life?

I think that it was the Gold Medal at Dunvegan, that that was the biggest. I wanted to get the Gold Medal at Oban or Inverness. I didn't get close to these, but when I got the Gold Medal at Dunvegan, that was the biggest prize and I was against the best players at the time like Gordon Walker, Alasdair Gillies, Roddy MacLeod; and on the same day as well, on the same day I won the Marches, the 6/8s on the same day. And I still remember being in the pub at night and one of the other famous pipers arrived, and he came in and he said to me "Oh there you are, you've won the 6/8s" and the man I am speaking about is Brian Donaldson, and he was "Oh there you are, you've done well, you won the 6/8s" and I said "many thanks, thank you" and I didn't believe him. And two minutes later this old man who was from Portree itself came in and he shook my hand and said "There you are, you've won the Gold Medal" and I said, "Oh I am sorry, I think you're wrong, I won the 6/8s". He said "Oh, I think you won that as well but I have just heard that you got the Gold Medal". I was absolutely delighted. But also, I won the 'B' Grades a couple of times at Inverness, I got the 'B' Grade marches and I also won the 'B Grade Strathspey and Reels' and I got the second prize in the 'A Grades marches' twice. And the two times I got the second prize, the first time it was a famous piper who is very, very good Angus MacColl who beat me. And the second time, as far as I remember I think it was Stuart Liddell who beat me. I am quite unfortunate, that's the only thing I think; to not get into the highest competition in light music, that is "The Former Winners' March Strathspey and Reel", I was very, very close but as I said when I was in the recruiting team for three years I was playing at my best at that time.

And do you remember who the judge was at Dunvegan

I remember one of them and it was someone quite famous, Lieutenant Col D J S Murray, he has had a tune named after him, he was there that day, and I have to say, I was the third person on that morning, and it began at nine o'clock and the person who played before me was

Patricia Henderson, Murray Henderson's wife; she played very well. And I went on, and I played "Lament for the Earl of Antrim" and when I began playing, my bagpipe was going really well, but as I went on and on and on, I recognised that my bagpipe was staying exactly in tune very well, I made no errors and when I got to the end of the tune, I was not even nervous, I did not say to myself "Oh I am going to make a mistake here" and that was it. I just said to myself "Och well, I was happy with the tune, I don't think I'll win, but I'll keep going to the end", and I just kept going and he said to me afterwards, I think it was the next day, he said that I had won it quite easily. I think it was Willie MacCallum who was in second place. So that pleased me. And that gave me the opportunity then to play – and until this day I can play in the Clasp at Dunvegan – well in Portree, there is a Clasp for those who have won the Gold Medal. But I have played in the Clasp two or three times but unfortunately I have not yet won a prize there, but perhaps the day will come!

What about, say, the advice you got from people about piping, do you have anything in your mind about the best advice you ever got about playing the pipes?

The single piece of advice, I would say, which stuck in my mind and I try to keep with it until this day, although it is not at all easy. And that is what Pipe Major Gavin Stoddart said to me that he used to do himself, when I was on that course, seven months at the Castle, and that is, if you can just play your pipes for five minutes every day, that will keep your pipes going well, that is what he said.

And do you still have your father's pipes?

I still have them, and I have to say that they are going very well just now anyway, I have a ceilidh or two coming up and so I try to play them as often as I can but it is not easy sometimes because of my work and such.

That is it then