



NOTING THE TRADITION

An Oral History Project from the National Piping Centre



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Interviewee Graham Richardson

Interviewer Billy Hutchison

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This is Billy Hutchinson for Noting the Tradition, I'm with Graham Richardson, eight times Grade One World Champion with the Glasgow Police at his home in Bearsden in Glasgow. Graham first of all I would like to say thank you very much for helping out with Noting the Tradition...

Oh you're welcome Billy.

As you know this is an oral history of piping we are doing...

Yes, yes.

And being a well-known, important figure in the piping world,, and you were one of my favourite subjects. As it's an oral history we are going to do things chronologically, so apologies for the boring way of doing things.

Not at all.

But could we go away back to the beginning?

Yes.

And tell us a wee bit about where you were born, where you grew up and your circumstances around that?

Well strangely enough I was born in Glasgow and I was brought up in Skye in a little village called Glas na Dil in Skye, and that was my start in life. My start in piping, I was started off at about twelve years of age by an old crofter Kenny Stoddart. Now Kenny was a very good player in his day, and he started me off. And there was an old shoemaker down in Broadford who played, and I used to go into the shop there where he mended the shoes, and sit down there with a chanter and he would hammer a nail in and then said you are doing that doubling on C wrong and we would go through it that way.

And then Donald MacLean the great Pipe Major Donald MacLean... I think he was one of the first to start..., to be employed by the schools

as a teacher. And I went to Donald for a while, and Donald was famous for one tune Major Manson of Clachantrushal which I think he wrote in the prisoner of war camp in the Second World War. He was captured at St Valéry and spent most of the war in a prisoner of war camp, but he was one of the great characters of piping. So that was my beginning in piping.

It was entirely different from the teaching nowadays, which is a lot better because methods of teaching have improved a great deal. But you jumped from person to person in my young days to get your piping education, and with it went a lot of banter. The chap I told you at first the old crofter Kenny who taught me, Kenny they had, it was more a small farm and they had about a dozen cats on the farm. And when I was getting going with the pipes..., the cats would be roundabout the place. And there was an old cat who was about twenty years of age, who was called Aunt Grace. And Kenny would shout, “Graham,” he would shout, “you are doing very well, the cats are doing an eightsome* reel..., and Aunt Grace is in the centre now” he would shout. And now Aunt Grace became very famous because Angus Lawrie composed a tune and called it Aunt Grace, now I am not quite sure but it may be used in the Argyll* collection for a very good wee reel. So there was no pressure on you and it was very enjoyable the early days but...

So your first teacher Kenny Stoddart he was a teacher..., as an individual teacher or was he a pipe major of a band that you were involved with?

No he was an individual teacher..., he had fought through the war also. He was a..., and actually he went for lessons to Peter MacLeod of Partick, who again was one of the famous old timers who composed the march The Conundrum and many, many great piping light music compositions. Kenny went to him after the war years, before then I am not sure...

What was his teaching style, what kind of a person was he?

He would show you the basics, it was..., he was a character, a famous character. He died four or five years ago, his teaching methods were very free and easy and adventurous. He was a good lovely expressive player himself, he could have gone a long way if he had bothered with competitions or anything like that. He played in the Portree Pipe Band, and the Isle of Skye Pipe Band as it's called now, and he played there until he was in his seventies. And that was..., it was Logan's Tutor we were taught with, and you had to be dedicated with that as you have probably seen yourself the tutor.

And you weren't allowed to touch a tune until you had learned everyone of the exercises from the first to the last, so if you mastered it all it was a good method of teaching..., but I think it put a lot of people off, and that the book I think was that revolutionised teaching was the book that Seamus MacNeill and Tommy Pearston wrote at the College, the tutor that wrote there. I think that was a big, big breakthrough in as you can see by the structure of the book you learn so many exercises and you incorporate them in a tune, so I think that's where it differs now and there is many books written on it teaching now. I think Logan's Tutor the first one, once the person's reasonably accomplished it has got very good exercises to exercise the fingers and one thing and another they are like that.

So you are twelve years old when you begin, your teacher is Kenny Stoddart?

Aye.

Is there any piping history in your family?

My grandfather played but that was away back in the eighteens probably and of course the early part of the century..., of the last century. But they all played by ear then because there were no tutors in the Highlands, he was a seaman but there were quite a number of

pipers. And they all played by ear, they played their own way, but that was the only history of piping covered* in the family.

So roundabout that time was it fair to say that it was just solo piping that you were involved in?

That's right, it was only solo piping I was involved in. And by the time I was what fifteen or sixteen I was playing at the local dance and one or other, playing for reels and other areas, dances you could play on the pipes. And I wasn't involved in the bands until I went into the army for National Service for the Cameron Highlanders, and that is when I joined the Cameron's band.

Were you involved in the solo competition circuit at all at that time?

No, not at that time... When I came back in the army I did a bit of solo competitions, but I was never that successful. Maybe I got an occasional prize* on the fringes, but I wasn't dedicated enough I think to achieve the standard that you had to do to get into the big prizes.

And just before we move onto your band career and the beginning of that, your family... Obviously you are a Skye family was it Gaelic or English at home?

It was Gaelic at home, it was Gaelic until I went to school and up until I left Skye when I went into the army at eighteen it was all Gaelic. But if you look at it today I can only think of only four..., not many more that speak Gaelic. It is all incomers now that's in Skye now and most of the Islands, but I will add that whatever might be thought of that if the incomers weren't there nobody would be there so that's...

One of the reasons I asked you about the Gaelic is you said that your grandfather was a piper?

Yes.

And I just wondered if you had any exposure to the canntaireachd?

No not really..., it depends... It depends on this canntaireachd is defined, the definition of it. Yeah I regret very much that I didn't learn much piobaireachd all my life, I was very, very late..., too late in starting it. But yet, yes if it came to canntaireachd light music, yes for expression and that, yes. But the canntaireachd you have written in Piobaireachd Society books or that I think that was invented by them, I don't think any Gaelic speaker ever invented it. But be that as it may, yes the canntaireachd to get..., the canntaireachd Colin does at the band practice, a wee are better than Colin's voice, but nevertheless it was the same idea, that canntaireachd it is just most mouth music, cainnt being language.

And did you spend all of your childhood on Skye, did you stay in Skye until adulthood?

I stayed on Skye until I was eighteen and went into the army, and apart from holidays from that day on that is all I have ever been back in Skye. I was back as often as I could be, but most of all my contemporaries are gone now on Skye so. But I still have a house up there and go up, and Norman Stoddard who was Kenny's, my old tutor's cousin. He was pipe major of the Skye band for many years, so Norman's up there..., he has got a small sheep farm there. So when I go up to Skye we spend most of the time together reminiscing and the usual [Laughter].

In Gaelic or English?

Gaelic.

In Gaelic...?

Yes.

So we get to you joining the army, I believe it was the Cameron's?

Yes the Cameron's.

Can you tell us a wee bit about your experience there?

Well after the initial training at Cameron Barracks at Inverness, we were drafted down to Elgin and then we went to Korea that was our first posting. Now at Elgin that was the first time that I met the great John Burgess, who was one of the great players of the last century, John was a character too. And I always remember before..., before I..., John was ages with myself, he died just three or four years ago after a car accident.

But John I remember he was getting a lot of media publicity when he won everything when he was about sixteen..., he was absolute genius as far as playing tunes for you. You hear the stuff they are doing today, well John was doing that for fun when I knew him sixty years ago. But I always remember when the draft came down from Inverness to Elgin, here he was this guy whose photograph was in the paper. He was a corporal in the Cameron's, and here he was marching up and down the platform, and oh, he saw me with my pipe case and my kit bag and all the rest after I came in the depot, and right he said you're a piper come with me..., we don't wait for the riff raff he says.

And you know to a boy like me at that time it was like somebody then meeting The Beatles, this guy had his own jeep*, and oh what style up to the camp. And he..., Evan MacRae, the pipe major was there..., and John. Right says John play me a tune, and I played them Leaving Glenurquhart, the march Leaving Glenurquhart..., and I know he says who taught you..., it was Donald MacLean he says. Now the reason I went to Donald..., Donald was teaching it in the schools. But that was the tune that Donald..., the big, big tune that was taught, and taught all his pupils. And I thought John was a genius he knew right away when he heard it he just knew that was Donald, all his pupils..., anybody that arrived at the depot and was playing Leaving Glenurquhart were taught by Donald MacLean.

So from Elgin we went to Korea that was in 1955..., and Korea the hostilities were over but it was still an active service posting. We were stationed on the 38th Parallel, and you know that the weather in Korea was really vicious, thirty below and at the peak. And when you were playing pipes in that you couldn't because the reeds froze up..., the reeds froze up. And we used to play Reveille at six o'clock in the morning, it was only a couple of squeaks you got out of the pipes. But it was..., we toured Japan being in the band..., we toured Japan..., well I say we toured Japan we did Kune, Osaka, Yokohama and Tokyo. And that was the summertime, and the piping side of it we practised, and we played in the various camps that the American Army were there, we were in the Commonwealth, your Australia's and the New Zealanders' camps we used to play there.

But I remember playing in Seoul for a fellow Duncan McDonald a friend of mine up in Inverness, Duncan was on Skye too, he lives in Inverness still. And playing at a wedding in Seoul, a Canadian officer's wedding..., and it was on the roof ..., well I thought it was a massive building coming from a croft house in Skye..., it did look massive. To deviate a bit the first place I ever saw a television it was Kune in Japan [laughter], and we were on the roof for this which was a skyscraper to me. It was about four storeys high, but they came to us and they said look just see the waiter and he poured us a drink, hanging about at the festivities. And just call the waiter when you are ready to go out, well I always remember we had got the whisky and ice and [laughter] when we had finished our dram we just rattled the glass with the ice in it and the wee Japanese came running in and poured in the whisky. So we had a good dram before we left, but I always remember that wedding.

So from there the Suez Canal crisis broke out, so we were diverted back to Aden. That's where we ended up to defend the oilfields in Aden, not that anybody ever bothered with them..., but fortunately enough. But I had two incidents there that were quite funny, Angus

Lawrie wrote a tune The Piper in the Cesspool well that was me. And I was to play at a brigadier's daughter's twenty-first birthday party, again which was on a rooftop. I think that rooftop was much higher than the one in Seoul, but anyway so I said to the drum major the band was to play at Khormsakar Airport which was the main airport in Aden. And with playing at the brigadier's daughter's I thought I would be excused, and oh no who did I think I was, you do the engagement with the band and you will come back here and you will go to the brigadier's party.

So when we got there the ratings weren't allowed spirits, oh to this do at Khormsakar Airport..., whisky and rum and anything that you wanted. So I said to Billy I am going to enjoy myself here, I was so angry I don't need to do the job at all. So I came back to the billet, to the tent..., oh billets, they were tents. And I had acquired a half bottle of whisky I don't know how, but there was a fellow from Skye in the signals tent across the sands about three or four hundred yards. And I wanted to go and give Iain a dram of this in full dress, and they knew that I was playing at the party. And going across the sands I saw what I thought was a concrete slab where there shouldn't be one there, and I went right up to my waist in full dress..., it was a stank...,

Cesspit?

Cesspit...

Jeez.

So I arrived..., I arrived at the tent and, oh, Iain nearly had a fit and they were rubbing me down with sweatrags. And the next minute the jeep came and I was off to the brigadier's party, so I was met by an officer DJ McDonald a great character too, right he says, Graham, play a few tunes and march round the gathering..., just do your own thing and I thought fine. So I kept in the shadows as much as possible and I don't think anyone saw me, well I had finished one of our

selections and somebody came up and said we would like you to meet now the brigadier and his daughter well I am standing downwind of them [laughter], but I survived that..., I got over it without anybody noticing. But och I think they were all so drunk anyway they wouldn't have bothered, but it wasn't a very comfortable experience.

And the other..., we played quite a lot again in..., oil workers used to have nights and do something and we played a lot of that. But the other funny incident I had there..., I had handed my..., I was coming home I was getting demobbed in the January. And Suez was really building up by this time..., things were getting nasty and the locals were turning against us. However I had handed all my kit into the company stores except you know what I was coming home, and Evan MacRae came in and said, "Graham you are the most experienced piper I have got left." He said because a lot of change overs and young boys, and the Governor of Aden is going to a conference down in Makalah on the coast of Aden, and you will see on the map that it's down the coast from the Gulf of Aden and they want a piper to put on the cruiser Newfoundland.

So all the gear out of the store and back onto the bagpipes, no piper ever says you can have my pipes so that was fine. And now at that time I had prickly heat with the constant sweating and in the temperature all day, you couldn't feel a thing when the body was cool, but when you heated up you were absolutely tearing yourself apart. Well my first engagement I had to play on the deck at night, some said the quarterdeck, but I was led to believe that nobody was allowed in the quarterdeck at night but the high heid yins, but I was on some deck anyway. But anyway I was getting ready down below in Newfoundland* in the heat, and I was like...

And they had a ships pet, a wee monkey. This little thing oh a very small, it was an intelligent beast too as I found out to my cost. Well as I was trying to get my hose on he was taking my socks and running

away with them and going..., I was oh. Well he jumped up on the bunk and I hit him in the nose..., bang..., he went wild, screaming all over the place, and ran out of the place and I was... Anyway I got well from..., I was about four days to Makalah, two days at sea, and two days there, he made my life a misery. And I used to sleep on deck at night and I would say well boy if you come up here during the night while I am asleep you could take the gun off me, and the funniest thing he was so intelligent he would never go for me except when there was trainers about when he knew that I could do nothing. It was absolutely amazing, and never did I get an opportunity to... [laughter].

So that was Aden, it was as I say the locals got rather hostile towards us as time went on. I had another incident in the Crater, four of us from the band... The Crater..., when you sail into Aden you have got the Barren Rocks and the hills in front of you. And there is a mountain pass goes straight through the rocks, into the mountain. And on the other side is the place called The Crater where Mad Mitch made his name, and the big..., when Colin Campbell was in charge of the Argylls that's when the Crater*.

But when we went it was a great shopping place, all the traders. So the four of us were walking round The Crater shopping, now that day a rumour went round the camp that Nasser the president of Egypt had been assassinated, and I can see the boy in my mind yet in this market place. He is sitting on a high chair and he has got a huge photograph of Nasser in front of him, and as we were approaching he says Nasser deman..., which meant Nasser good. And I said to him look I says Nasser dead throat cut today, that is the rumour we heard and thought nothing else of it. But then the marketplace it was like a rising wind, a babble of voices getting more excited and more excited. The next thing they are all pointing at us and wailing and praying and shouting, and the stones, the bottles we had to run for our lives. And Alec Murray from Dumfries shouting "You so and so, you never stopped until you got us killed", but I had never experienced of how the sound

of voices began to rise and rise to a crescendo. But that was..., so that was my last encounter in Aden*.

And you said going into there you sailed through the Barren Rocks?

Aye the Barren Rocks.

As we know there is a famous tune called the Barren Rocks of Aden is that...?

Aye and its well named because it's barren there is nothing there.

Do you know the origins of that tune, is it anything to do with the regiments that was there?

I don't know if it's anything to do with the regiments, it must have done, it must have been some... I don't know I haven't seen any composer ever on the thing was it a traditional tune or was it just named, as many of the pipe tunes are. They are all Gaelic airs or something and given other names, but no it's strange that it must have been that because whoever wrote it was in Aden because there's nothing more barren than Barren Rocks of Aden. It's all true.

So when you are finished in Aiden I take it you are demobbed or...?

Yes got back to Inverness and I was demobbed and then I joined the police in Glasgow, that's the Glasgow Police then. But I was seven years in the police before I went into the band, Angus McDonald from North Uist was the pipe major then. Angus coerced me into joining the band, I had let my piping slip at that time quite a bit because I wasn't..., I had played at the occasional engagement but I really didn't play much at all actually...

For seven years?

Oh well..., oh I kept my hand in but nothing new... Well I had slipped back so much that mind you probably I would have had, that Angus used to have me at his house two nights a week to get up to speed for the band shows and everything so... But that was..., and then I played in the band when it was the Glasgow Police. We were doing very well..., again Angus McDonald had to build up the band because the old school had all retired. And it was allowed to go and go, and when he took over it was all new fellows he had recruited into the band, we were all police then. But I think there is only about four policemen in the band now.

Yeah I was going to say when you were in the police back in those days and you are in the pipe band are there..., are you treated differently from your fellow officers who are non-pipers are there special...?

Yes you had steady day shift and you had time for practice and all that, oh yes you were treated different. But with Angus we won everything minor..., not minor. Every major except the Worlds and we must have been second in that, the biggest disappointment and Angus was at Inverness. Muirheads were the big guns then and they broke our hearts . So yes, they were a great band where Bob Hardy was the pipe major at the time..., one of the great pipers of his era.

And at Inverness we drew with Muirheads, but they got it on an ensemble preference, they had higher marks, we were second once again. Then Ronnie Lawrie took over, Angus was promoted and he gave up the band. And Ronnie Lawrie took over, but Ronnie he started off really well but again things started slipping a bit. I don't think Ronnie got the support that he should have got at the time, but anyway Ronnie relinquished the crown then as pipe major.

I need to tell you a funny story that Ronnie Lawrie told me and others told me too, Ronnie was a great solo player. He won nearly everything, he was marvellous, he was a giant of a man about six feet

five and a great player. But there was a man in Oban who used to play every year in the local piobaireachd, and apparently he was a very..., not a very good player. But on this occasion he asked Ronny when he had finished his piobaireachd, while he must have been hanging about he asked him what did you think of my tune this year? And Ronny wanted to be honest but he wanted to be nice about it, well he says, Alistair, he says you were walking a lot better this year [laughter]. But that great character that these fellows were in their days, I don't know if it is like that now I don't think so.

The professional players today are very professional, there was the characters..., probably it's the same in sport. There was great characters in the piping world then all great individuals, and they were great players. But now if you look at your top echelons, they are very, very professional, and there is no nonsense... In that day everything was free and easy, but nevertheless they were terrific players. But anyway Ian McLellan took over than band after Ronnie retired from the band, and well the rest is history. Though it took him a long time, it took him about four years to win the world title. But by jove when he won it by he went..., but he was one of the greats.

That was the start of probably the most successful grade one pipe band period we have ever seen?

Yes it was, aye, yes.

And I believe that for the majority of that period your arch enemies for the want of a better expression was Shotts and Dykehead?

Oh they were, they were.

Who was the pipe major of Shotts and Dykehead at the time?

Tom MacAllister, John K I think, his brother at the very start. At the very start John K was the pipe major when I first encountered them

and then it was Tom, one of the great things John K used to say was when we would come in..., when they would be coming off and meeting us going on they would say the very second best of luck boys they used to say, and that was a catchphrase then. But one of the memories of Shotts was it was very close and we went to Shotts..., and to win the Guinness... This is a thing that you don't hear about today is the Guinness Trophy at the top of the league, now we all got a..., we used to get a wee medal for winning the Guinness Trophy.

Is this like the Champions of Champions now?

Yes..., yes but they stopped giving the medal. But at the top of the league is a great thing to get, however the European Championship used to be at Shotts and was the last major of the year, and we had to be no matter where Shotts we had to be ahead of Shotts, if they were third we had to be second. We had to be to get the points and if they were ahead of us they win it the...

Is this your first world championship or...?

No, no this was I can't remember what year it was. But it was the last major contest of the season, the whole thing hung who was ahead of Shotts or us in the points lead. Well we were on two bands after Shotts, and Shotts came down the road past where we were tuning, and they used to play a great tune King George V's Army, and oh by god they came down there, they were sounding great. And we said by jove we would have to be good to beat that today, because oh they were going well and unusually it was a good day at Shotts weather-wise.

Well anyway we went on, and we played well and the Shotts boys were up on that terrace thing that cove up there and they were looking very down. And I went up to Donald Thompson who was a friend of me, he was the band sergeant. And I said Donald you sounded fantastic going on today, when you passed us when we were

tuning up..., don't talk about it Graham, don't talk. Oh I said this sounds good I didn't see that, what I says what? Well in them days I think we had three sets and the judge or steward came out with a bag and the pipe major with four dices saying number one, two or three set, you do know what you were playing when you went on the line.

So shall we say for argument's sake they drew number one set, and Tom the pipe major who was one of the best in the business Tom starts playing number two set? Of course the man next to him thought it was him, and they were in the circle before anybody was playing the right tune, so we won the Guinness trophy that day. But we won the contest, but it was oh..., it just shows you anybody no matter who they are, that is one thing in a competition make a mistake, nobody can shout at you or because anybody can do and that was a real major one.

So the rest as they say is history...?

Yes.

And I suppose just as under your previous pipe major, Muirheads had continually broken your heart...?

That's right.

Your guys were doing the same thing to Shotts and Dykehead.

Aye [laughter] that was it, but Shotts* and Dykehead* are still going well. The police och there was..., I honestly don't know what the structure of the police is at all now. When I left the police there was no civilians in it, it was all police, but we did a lot of travelling in the police over the years. But then as I say since..., I have been retired twenty-five years this year from the police. But I have done a few, I was over in India, and I have been in the Czech Republic for solo jobs. But apart from that I vowed that I would never go into a band

again after it, and so Murray Kirsop in our own wee band talked me to go up to help them.

This is our band at the moment Strathendrick you are talking about yeah?

Aye and we went..., I went up and of course Colin the pipe major talked me into..., he wondered would you mind competing with us, so I am enjoying it thoroughly so its... You see it's more relaxed for me than what the police was, because the time it came to the end and the police it was a total disaster if you came second..., it was absolutely awful. I don't mean it's relaxed..., its relaxed for me because the tunes aren't so difficult as the... But mind you it's the same pressure you have to keep your mind on things, you can as easily make a mess of that as make it in grade one.

But now grade one they have pushed the boundaries now in a way, the way I see grade one in our heyday, march, strathspey and reel, yes we could have them with any band out there, but not when it comes to the melodies..., what do you call them the..?

The medleys?

Medleys, when it comes to that we won it. Well it wasn't done in our time but oh my goodness...

What was it you think that they have got on you now, is it to do with the setup and the harmonies, or is it the finger work or...?

Well I suppose it's a mixture of everything, and it's a little form of piping. To me I don't like it, there is an awful lot of it and I don't. But again I mean the fingering and the wizardry* of fingering now, there is stuff to play on the harmonies and everything. In fact I hear harmonies now and I think it's just a noise..., they are murdering the tune along with the harmonies. It's alien to me, I am old fashioned

now that I am old but..., I don't like it. But no we were not as good as these fellows, but again everything is as good as its time so...

Yeah.

So whether the group of us that were there, then if we had had that approach to piping but oh... And again I think that the most pipers we ever had was about fourteen, good lord there is about thirty pipers now. And what amazes me is how they can get the pipes in tune altogether, listening at the medleys I can't make out what they are doing after that. But I listened on the television the other night at Piping Live 2010, and I was listening to the big guns playing the march, strathspey and reels. And my goodness the character that they were getting with all these pipers, but I think we didn't have electronic tuners for the ear and yet our sound was every bit as good as... But I think to tune there is no pipe major that could control thirty pipers you know, to tune them without a few of these instruments and others going around and doing the job. But oh it has changed a great deal, I suppose everything does.

Can you remember you're very, very first Worlds win and how it felt?

Yes indeed, oh our first Worlds win was quite dramatic for us. We had the Police Tattoo at the Kelvin Hall, it was a big annual thing at the Kelvin Hall all the police horses and the band and everything. And the year we won it, it was at Hawick, and we had to just play and come straight back to Glasgow. We didn't know the result, it was announced at the Kelvin Hall that we were world champions. And it was I suppose your first one..., I mean after all these years I doubt there was a band that won it since the days of the great John McDonald of the Glasgow Police of the 1950's and that was the first time we had won.

So it was a tremendous feeling, but I remember how nervous I was. John MacFadyen one of the great MacFadyen players was judging and I knew John well. And John knew all the band well, we all knew him, he was one of the judges. So he was one of a number of judges..., but John and he was standing. Now I think the judges now as far as I can see there is a circle they can't go..., they can't go..., one time when we were playing their heads used to be between you and I in the circle. Now it's a nonsense because you can't hear, you are only hearing two pipers when to diverse again, when John McAllister and John K judged people used to do what he did. He would go round the band and then he would stand about fifty yards away, and would say I am hearing a band now.

But there would be John MacFadyen anyway at Hawick, oh hello Graham he says and "Right Ian," he says, "Carry on". And he is walking down beside me [laughter], and I am saying to myself if I have a bad attack, I am right in his ear hole. But I didn't and we got by it and we ended up winning the World Championship that was the first time, and it was announced in the Kelvin Hall so... There was another time...? Aye there was another time that we won I have got it now Nottingham, when the championship..., so that is nine world champions [laughter].

So have I to correct the opening there, it wasn't eight World Championships it's nine [laughter]?

It's nine, and of course I knew there was..., Nottingham was a great time. We were playing at the Tattoo in Glasgow at the Police Tattoo that year, and at eleven o'clock at night we went on the bus to Nottingham and down to Loughborough University. And we went to the contest and won it, but it was great again coming back up the next night to play at the Tattoo to come in as world champions in the Kelvin Hall with the crowd and everything, that was quite an

occasion. But aye I knew there was another one somewhere I couldn't remember.

Just before we move on from the police, I know there has been a lot in the news the last few years about the police pipe band about the withdrawal of funds...?

Yes.

And about the fact that the pipers are not getting any special consideration with regard their shifts. I think the band actually looked as if it was going to end at one point, I believe it is still going in some form. Do you still have any contact with the police or do you still have any opinion there?

I haven't, I haven't any contact with the new band at all. I don't understand what the setup is now, I have no real contact and nobody seems to know what's happening as far as... We are having a reunion in April of this year so maybe I will hear then, but I have heard them and I've heard recorded stuff, they are a very good band. But to me it's not a police band now, because there is only four policemen in it.

But yes it was..., I mean I don't know they could have kept the band going the way it was. We were a very successful police unit when we were all in Central Division that is what we were, Patrick Hamill was the Chief Constable and he created the unit. And we dealt with crime in the town and that type of stuff, and apparently it was very successful on this. And then we had a number of Chief Constables Andrew Sloan and Leslie Sharp, John Orr and they had a band and it was their thing. But then this new fellow came that just butchered the whole thing, and I honestly don't know how...

This is the new Chief Constable?

The new Chief Constable, and I don't know how they get funding or how much the police has to do with them I just don't know. But I

know for one thing there are no facilities none at all, and a lot of them are playing in other bands the policemen that were in the police which was unthinkable, so I don't know.

So moving on from the police, are you telling me that for the twenty-five years that you have been retired, up until joining Strathendrick* a couple of years ago you had no involvement in pipe bands?

No none at all.

No?

None at all, I just had no involvement at all in bands. I played on solo of course not competing, but engagements and I kept active that way, but no nothing. Well I suppose it was circumstances, getting to my age I couldn't play in a grade one band now, and I couldn't play in a two or a three probably either [laughter]. But the wee band here I can play in that, I am not too bad I can get the tunes alright. But I just..., it never just happened and I had no desire to. And when I went up to Strathendrick* I thought I was just going to help teach the youngsters, but when I got going with it I have enjoyed it all and it's a great wee organisation.

And I believe that you have been a member of the Glasgow Highland Club?

Yes.

I take it that has played a big part in helping you to keep your hand in while you have been retired from the police?

Yes, that's right, that's right. The Glasgow Highland Club it is founded on piping and very piping orientated..., yes all that kind of thing. Another thing I was extremely lucky on, I have no great ear to set a pipe chanter, in fact I am pretty poor at it. Now in the police I had Ian McLellan and John Wilson two great fellows for getting the

tone, and so I never had to try too hard because I got it done for me. And then I went to Strathendrick and Colin is another genius at setting the pipes, and in fact Colin's job in our Grade Four band is a lot harder than a Grade One pipe major because I remember saying to Ian McLellan when he was at the top of his peak with the band and everything I says how do you think you would fair with a lower grade band? Would you create wonderful...? I says I don't know I would probably be useless because my job is easy I am only to set up the pipes, it's all good players I deal with I haven't to..., I haven't to do anything. That is always a different ballgame entirely when you..., I will tell you why...

Is this because the lower grade players maybe don't blow as steady and...?

Steady and the various..., the various degrees of ability you have got and to blend them together, and that's where you have got to do what you are doing, it's a different approach. But I will tell you a funny story about Ian McLellan. We were going to I can't remember what world champion was, used to practice at Anniesland High School playing fields. Well, we were starting, set us up and played the sets a couple of times. And the next thing he exploded and called us for all the useless so and so and so on under the sun, world champions, there is not much hope for you if you play like that tomorrow. And we was jeez, what was wrong, and oh we were just stunned.

So we went home everybody shaking his head and wondering what was wrong with it, he was going round going into a fit. So anyway like everything else on the day of our contest, and I think you get the same with Colin when the day of the contest you approach it there is no word of it and we won it. And at the next practice him and I were together in the car coming up to Anniesland on the Tuesday, Iain I says... I says what was that the stramash on Friday I says and the practice what was wrong with the band? Nothing he says I went round

the band he says and I got a fright, I heard them playing the sound and everything and I said to myself here it is we've peaked, we've had it what can I do? We will never get this sound, and the only thing I could do is give you a row and bring you back down to earth. So that was Iain's psychology.

Graham you come from Skye...?

Yes.

This is a controversial subject, but because you come from Skye I am going to have to ask you your opinion on it. The MacCrimmon* legend what is your take on it?

Well it's very, very hard to say I don't think..., I think there is a lot of legend..., I am using the word legend about it. Alistair* Campsie* have you ever read the book?

You recommended it to me and I bought it yes.

Yes, the..., the...

The Mac...*

Well after that book came out all the big guns were on, Colonel Murray*, and you name them they were turning somersaults. But they didn't disprove any of the points that Campsie* made, maybe it was too severe. But funny going back to my old tutor Kenny now one of the points I think that Campsie* made, there was no trace..., archaeological trace of a college every being in Borreraig* he made that claim in the book.

Just for the record I think it's fair to say we are talking about the book by Alistair Campsie*?

That's right.

I think it's called The MacCrimmon Legend and the Madness of Angus McKay, is that it?

That's right, aye. Now Kenny..., I gave Kenny my old tutor the book and he said oh it's a load of rubbish. And then I brought up now none of the scholars picked up on it, I says well he says I says in the book there is no trace of there ever being a college at Borreraig. Of course he says there's not. Once a building in them days was vacated all the stones were pillaged by other people to build other houses and there wouldn't be a trace of it, so none of the scholars picked up on that. But I think there is an awful lot of..., see Donald McLeod once said to me..., the great Donald McLeod he said that what he found strange about paiobaireachd that he thought a lot of it as we know it today was impossible for the people to compose because they thought in song in those days. And that's incorrect, some of it is like Gaelic song, some of it, is but an awful lot of it..., but I think there is a lot of legend. I think if I'm right have you ever read Johnson* and Boswells* Journey To The Hebrides?

No I haven't.

That's a very good book, now he, I don't think was at Dunvegan Castle in 1773 and makes no mention of bagpipes whatsoever. So you just wonder if it was so..., so much to the fore that there is something about it. And now I don't know if this is true or not but wee Donald McLeod told me that there is no trace of where any of them are buried. Now whether that and I don't know if I am being accurate with that or not, but he said that there is no trace of..., where you would think there would be some sort of trace. I think that there probably were pipers.

I have a funny saying Roderick McDonald, John McDonald's brother maybe you have probably heard the story when they have this... Now this bagpipe at Dunvegan Castle the speckled grey pipes, bagpipes that were found in a house in Skye the last century some time. And if

this was the speckled gray pipes of the MacCrimmons who knows, but Ruairidh Roidein as I called him, was an outspoken character. Ruairidh was asked to play the pipes, and Ruairidh put reeds in it and blew it up and footered with it for a while he says all that is good for is firewood [laughter] and this was the grey MacCrimmon pipe but it's in a glass case there. Now there must have been something piping wise but who knows, and I reckon that a lot of the tunes, well as Campsie did that Angus McKay had taken from Argyll and other places. Donald McLeod said that a series of piobaireachd came from Ireland with the harp....

But no I think I know alright, but there is some people religiously swallow this. Especially people from overseas, it's a lovely story but I think that's all it is at the end of the day [laughter].

So we have come close to the end of the interview, there is just a couple of questions I would like to ask you. One is the obvious, the greatest piper you have ever met or ever heard playing? You don't have to nail it down to one if you feel you are going to be upsetting somebody, but do you have a superstar hero that is your favourite of all time?

I haven't as such..., at the present day Angus MacColl that's my..., I mean...

Angus MacColl, Oban?

Angus MacColl, Oban, Stuart Liddell is a great player. All the top echelons they are lovely players, but this is a matter of taste. And John Burgess in his heydays.

Where was John Burgess from?

He was..., apparently his father was a mystery man. His father was from Balfron apparently, and he went to Willie Ross and was... There was a story told about him when Ross was teaching the great pipe

majors and the Guards, and he was teaching them I think it was Lament for the Children. And there was this ???? one of the hardest tune of the book to interpret it properly. Now he says to them when they were finished their lessons on playing*, I am going to bring this fellow in to let you hear how it should be played. And John Burgess came in at twelve years of age and played the Lament for the Children, they were all threatening to throw their pipes away, what will we be doing all our lives. He could play it with either hand on top too, but oh he was a great character. He was one..., as I said before there was characters then.

I am not on the circuit now maybe there is now too, but I think they are more professional now, they are not the same. And I think there is not the same drinking went on as went on at..., the characters Willie Lawrie that composed The Pap of Glencoe, and all these great marches, Kilbowie Cottage. But as the story told he went on after competing in the Gold Medal, and his wife asked how did you get on, he said I won the gold medal but I gave it to John McColl he said [laughter], of course that's Angus McColl's uncle. But yes that is my favourite player, he's my favourite player and there others just as good but especially a two four marches. But the Uist and Barra is on this Saturday so I will be going down there.

That is down at the College of Piping?

Aye, the College of Piping so...

And suffice to say you have travelled the world because of it?

That's right.

You have met loads of great characters because of it?

Yes, yes.

Piping has been a big part of your life?

Oh aye, yes.

If you were speaking to somebody and they were thinking about getting their youngster into piping, what would you say that piping gives to somebody if they take it up at that age?

As I say it opens so many doors, you can travel the world with it. You met the great and the good..., you have a whole that type of... It opens just I feel as my life would have been very dull, I don't know what I would have done without piping. I mean as time goes on it's always with you whether you are playing or not, and yes it's a great thing. And especially now with the way it's broadened out and all these folk bands, I mean there are lovely players in these, players with great, great fingers, they don't bother with pipe bands or competitions. They are all making more from travelling more doing that.

Fred Morrison* comes to mind.

Fred oh aye..., Fred is an absolute genius and also he has won everything too that can be won in conventional piping. Oh aye he's great.

And I believe he hasn't written off a comeback as well so you never know..., watch this space.

Oh you never know, Duncan McDonald was telling me my friend in Inverness he heard him play was it that kind of former winners' contest of some sort of competition in Inverness that Fred was second in, my goodness he said he can still play the conventional stuff. Aye so he said that, every time I met Fred he always says well are you still having a tune, yes I says I can play Highland Laddie as good as Fred Morrison any day, that's the spirit he says [laughter].

Right one last question, it probably seems a strange one for somebody who has enjoyed as much success that you have had.

But any regrets? Anything you didn't do in piping that you sit here now and wish you had have done?

Played piobaireachd that is the only regret I have as far as..., and maybe even put more into my light music than I did, I could have done a bit better. But nevertheless but not having played piobaireachd until it was far too late for it so that.

What kind of state of health do you think piping is in today, as compared to when you were in your heyday?

Oh it's better than ever, there is more pipers now and there is more good pipers now. The standard was good in my young days, but when I look at the competing piping now there is so many. There was..., I tell you when I was a boy it was unthinkable to be as good as the Donald MacLean's, MacLeod's, the John Burgess's. You couldn't be as good as them, you couldn't get a fellow of sixteen or seventeen and say who are the masters? I will show them. And the attitude has changed that way, oh no the piping is more of it from all over the world. You have got America, Canada, New Zealand, Australia all piping. Even the Japanese, and Europe, all over Europe, the Highland bagpipes, it's better than ever before as far as standards go and everything. The standard instrument of course has made it the engineering of the instrument for everything else, you can hear that when you hear the old recordings than it is now. Though on a last note John Burgess said if the pitch were any higher they would have to get collie dogs to judge it [laughter].

[Laughter] on that note [laughter] Graham Richardson thank you very much for your contribution to Noting the Tradition today.

Thank you very much Billy.