NOTING THE TRADITION

An Oral History Project from the National Piping Centre

Interviewee **Professor Hugh Cheape**

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This is Christine Martin talking to Hugh Cheape at Sabhal Mor Ostaig on May 10th 2012. Could you tell us where you were brought up Hugh?

I was brought up in Angus, between Forfar and Brechin.

Was it a musical family you were in?

Fairly musical. My mother was very musical. She was Welsh and very keen on singing, played the piano all the time and wanted me to play the piano, and I had piano lessons. I had a change of teacher and the attraction of the piano suddenly disappeared and so I was put under pressure to keep on playing an instrument and because there was piping in the family, I, in trying to persuade my parents that I would continue with a musical instrument, I lied through my teeth when I saw a chanter and I said "I'll play the pipes", having no intention of playing the pipes whatsoever, and still a hundred years later I am still playing the pipes. I think that was the influence of my family.

That's interesting. Who was your teacher when you went to your chanter lessons?

First of all it was a man called John Gordon, who I only had for a very short time, and then it was a man Pipe Major J B Robertson, who was pretty famous in the piping world, then it was somebody called Hugh MacRae.

Did you learn the pipes after you had the chanter, or did you go into pipes with these people?

Yes, the first man I only played the chanter with, but I went onto pipes with J B Robertson, and then with Hugh MacRae I really concentrated on pipes and particularly piobaireachd too.

And who taught Hugh MacRae?

Well there's a searching question. I'm not entirely sure. That's terrible and of course because of the apostolic succession of piobaireachd learning and so forth, I am not sure. I would need to think about that. So my inheritance is flawed. (Laughter)

So what was your Gaelic background?

Well only very slight, but my great uncle had spent most of his life in the Isle of Mull, and he'd learnt Gaelic and was very keen on it. When he was old and I was very little, he spent some time with us, because he was widowed, and so I learnt a bit from him. He was very enthusiastic and he wanted me to learn pipes too because he was a piper, and certainly thinking about it in a childish memory, I think he seemed to be floating the two elements together – pipe music and the language, but that's possibly me thinking too much into it.

So what sort of age were you when you began to play the pipes?

Well I started on the chanter about ten or eleven, and probably started on the pipes about fourteen. In those days you weren't allowed to start the pipes at first. You had to go through the rigours of playing the chanter for years on end, which I am sure was good for me.

Do you have any anecdotes about your piping teacher?

Well he was a very impressive man. I was a little boy and he was a big man. He was very kind, but he was of that old school who, if you made a mistake, he'd rap you over

the fingers with his chanter, and I do remember that very vividly. (Laughter)

You wouldn't get away with that now.

No, but I think looking back I was too young really to know how distinguished he was and too immature to ask him the questions that I would like to ask him now.

How much practice did you do when you were younger?

Not a huge amount of course, but we formed a small pipe band and once we did that, we did more practice, worked at it. I can't really remember in terms of hours a day, or hours a week how much I practiced. Nothing that significant. It wasn't as though I was a child prodigy who was going to be schooled for piping and was drilled for hours each day. It was more personal.

An interest, a personal interest. What did you study at University?

Well, I was going to study history and I was advised just before I went to University in Edinburgh, to think about doing Scottish Historical studies. I have to say that was one of the best decisions I ever made to do Scottish Historical Studies because I think that I learnt a much more fundamental history, a much more rigorous and disciplined history than people doing, if you like, straight history at University. We were in Edinburgh sitting on the top of the all the records of Scottish history in the Record Office and we were taken to the Record Office in our first or second year and very much schooled in record scholarship and our Professor, Professor Gordon Donaldson was extremely keen on the records and the original primary sources, so we were extremely well

schooled. So that was one of the best decisions of my life was to do Scottish historical Studies.

That sounds very interesting.

It was a wonderful course and I really loved every minute of it.

What kind of bagpipes do you play yourself today?

Well I play big pipes and small pipes. Not playing so much on big pipes now. I have tinnitus in my ears, this hissing, and I think that's exacerbated by big pipes and the volume of sound, so I play the small pipes a lot, several times a week, well since I've come to Sabhal Mòr Ostaig there's a bit more incentive to play and practice. I am more inclined, particularly with our long winters to pick up the chanter and work at it, so I have about two or three new tunes on the go at the moment, which even at my advanced age is important.

Do you ever play with the students here?

I have done yes. We put on a small performance last year where two, three or four of the staff and three of the students put a programme together. That was good and I enjoyed that, and it made me practice.

Have you composed any bagpipes tunes?

One or two. Yes I wouldn't boast about them, but one has been published I have to say. When I came here my first boss Professor Norman Gillies, when he retired in 2009, I composed a tune for him, which I was quite pleased with. It was a little slow jig. I think probably I can make something of that. It needs a bit of developing.

You mentioned the influence of baroque music on early bagpipe music. Is this something you're interested in for research yourself?

It's entirely really a personal research ploy. I began to become aware of the huge variety in behind pipe music because I was interested in pipe music in a European context, and I began to realise and become aware of what had happened to Scottish fiddle music and the huge range of influences on Scottish fiddle music, particularly in the late 17/18th century and of course it's rather easier to get to grips with that because of the quantity of published music for the fiddle, in the same period of which there is really nothing published for the pipes. So you're dependent on the fiddle and fiddle music for your primary sources. I just began to develop that idea that the baroque and neo-baroque had an enormous influence on piping in Scotland, as it did in other parts of Europe, and I think that went against conventional wisdom about what Scottish piping is or was, or has been, or what the influences on it have been.

What is the most interesting resources of early bagpipe tunes that you've found and studied?

My views on that have changed. Everybody who takes an interest in the history of Highland bagpipes is interested in Joseph MacDonald's manuscript of 1760. I had a copy of that as a reprint and found it a bit unsatisfactory, when it came out as a reprint. That was in the late 70s. A scholarly edition of it was produced by Roderick Cannon for the Piobaireachd Society, so that produced a much, much better edition. That's absolutely fascinating. From then moved to my own interests of the early printed collections and particularly Angus MacKay and William Gunn. I found those hugely stimulating, each with a hundred of two hundred tunes. I was already thinking about the influence of if you like broadly speaking, the neo-baroque,

and in looking at these, say William Gunn, more so than Angus MacKay perhaps, you could feel how pipe music had emerged from a wellspring of inspiration, feeding on Gaelic music if you like, the native tradition, but also on the influence of the neo-baroque and timing the pacing of tube music and so on. William Gunn was a Sutherland man, one of the families displaced in the Kildonan Clearances in 1815/17, settled in Glasgow as weaver, suffered in the depression and the collapse of the textile industry in the 1820s and being a skilled man, turned to making bagpipes. Then he published his own book of music in 1848, so that's a hugely important collection, which I hope other people will take more interest in. We've got it re-printed now in a facsimile edition, so it is available. That's the sort of collection I've been very interested in.

At the very moment, I am very interested in the Eliza Ross manuscript, which is in the School of Scottish Studies. She was a granddaughter of the MacLeods of Raasay and she noted down music for the violin and the piano. She noted down the music from the playing of John McKay of Raasay, one of the great piping families. So we've got a way in to early pipe music then because somebody like John McKay is entirely, if you like, island born, bred and taught, so it gives us an insight into highland bagpipe music, in Raasay, in about 1800-1810. So that's very very valuable, and that's only just becoming available at the moment. The manuscript was discovered in Edinburgh in the 1950s and bought by Frank Collinson at the School of Scottish Studies and put into the School of Scottish Studies library. It hasn't been widely studied, but it's been there and it's been available for studies so I have had a chance to look at that.

That sounds very interesting.

Yes that's extraordinarily interesting.

Now for a different kind of question, what was your involvement in the founding of the BA Degree in Piping at the RSAMD, now the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland?

I have a very happy memory of that. I was invited to a meeting at the RSAMD as it then was, by Rita McAllister in 1988-9, or thereabouts, perhaps before then, 1987-8. There was a group of people invited to talk about the possibility of a BA Degree or a Degree in Scottish Music, and I was involved in those early discussions, and we sort of critiqued the idea and developed it up to a certain stage and then I was too involved with the Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh to continue. I was just there in that early consultation period and I was then invited back after a number of year, and when I was slightly freer myself, to look at the degree after it had been created and it had run for three years. We had a sort of re-validation team and so I came back. That was really special, to be involved in the early stages and then to be parachuted in at a stage when it had been developed and run for a short while. I suppose from a personal point of view I could see whether it was meeting the aspirations that I had for it. Indeed it was, so that was very exciting. Out of that validation process at that time, the proposal for a separate degree in piping came up, and that was very exciting, and so I was involved in validation of that, but it was in a very skeletal form. That was developed up in the following three years.

I was then invited to lecture on that so I have been involved with this BA Piping from the word go, from validation and creating the course in its first manifestation, and I have to say we really made it up on hoof as we went along in the first year. (Laughter) I shouldn't perhaps admit that. That was in I think 2001 that that came on

stream and I have been involved with it more or less since then.

That was a very rewarding thing to do.

Very exciting. And after, we had our first Honours Graduates. In other words, it had run its course as a separate degree for four years. I wrote a critique about it, both congratulating ourselves on the course and how it had been built and how it had gone, but also posing the question of where now and should we be re-assessing it and judging it, and producing new directions of making it more coherent or strengthening the different elements. So that was a very interesting process.

I published that article in the journal Piping Today, hoping for a storm of responses, and of course I didn't get them, although a very, very good student Simon McKerrell did produce a response, because I pressed him and pressed him to produce a response, otherwise I felt my remarks would have just fell from the pen dead as it were, so I was quite pleased that there was a response. I think that something like that should be almost continuously debated rather than just accepted that once there is a piping degree, that's it, because I think there's so much the weight of conventional wisdom in an area like piping in Scotland, is so great as to discourage any discussion, any different views, anything, so I'm a great proponent of debating it and pushing forwards the bounds of research and generally trying to advance things.

And do you think for instance that there should be more Gaelic in that course because so much of the research could be done using Gaelic tunes and Gaelic resources?

I feel very strongly that there should. Obviously that's very much in my interest and an interest that I followed, but I think it's very important because it's a more difficult area obviously to work in. That sounds very complacent actually, but I think it is for people coming to the subject, it's more difficult, it presents more difficulties than say just looking at the Scots language and the context of Scottish culture, which of course is the majority culture now. But the influence of Gaelic is hugely important and I believe it's only now that we're beginning to get a grip of the meaning and evolution of piobaireachd for example, ceòl mòr, because of peoples' willingness to recognise the role of language and everything that goes with that, phonetics, linguistics, sounds, singing and so on, the whole gamut of the language and culture. I think once you do grapple with that and apply yourself to it, I think that the understanding of piobaireachd leaps forward. It helps the fact that there are a lot of students who are doing Gaelic options or for example, are students on the BA Honours Music course here at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, where the course is conducted entirely through the medium of Gaelic, that there will be a new expertise that will have a better judgement for how we handle piobaireachd and I think that's already beginning to be seen in the performance of piobaireachd. It is a lot more interesting I think, than it was when I was young, when it was played to a formula, and the people who won the prizes played it in a highly disciplined way. But it has to be said very formulaic, and it's only since recently that I'd begun to feel more judgemental about that myself and to find myself much to my own amazement, switching off somebody playing a piobaireachd on the radio, if it's somebody in this highly mechanistic, highly disciplined way, absolutely if you like, note-perfect, but without any feeling whatsoever, or any interpretation of the background. I think it's within my own mind it's kind of significant I've developed this ability to turn off the radio when somebody playing a

piobaireachd in that style, since I have come here. I even shocked myself but I think I can't listen to that, it's so highly efficient and disciplined and perfect, but there is absolutely nothing behind it. It's just played to a formula and it's really boring.

A related question to that, you referred to the pearl of phenomenon of piobaireachd form being used by the great 18th century poet such as Rob Donn and Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, do you think this is merely a literally device on their part, or part of a more extensive tradition which is now lost?

I think it's both probably. I haven't done a great deal of work on that myself, apart from being keenly aware of it as a field of interest, but I think because of the intimate link between language and music in Gaelic, I'd be surprised if there wasn't an influence there. What possibly we're looking at is the influence of literally developments of the 18th century and that idea of musical forms or musical framework, as Rob Donn, Donnachadh Bàn and Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair use of couching their big poems in piobaireachd form. Perhaps it's a form of neo-baroque / literature and I rather suspect the influence of the broader British scene there, but that it comes more easily to Gaelic bards who are part of, if you like, they inherit the artistic orders of music and song and composition from earlier generations and they naturally find themselves using that form. I think they do it for effect, but I think behind it there lies something deeper, but we've still got a lot of research to do on that, I'm glad to say. I think it's very important in piping that we still have areas that people are prepared to admit can be researched, and that we're not weighed under the conventional wisdom of what we've been told and inherited.

When your book of Bagpipes – The National Collection of a National Instrument came out, what was the reaction to some of the more controversial comments you made in it, such as that society had invented the image of much of what was written in the 18th, 19th and 20th Century was untrue, and just a myth? But such as bagpipes marching into battle and walking around battlements and the regalia invented in Victorian times.

The influence of the 19th century hangs very heavily on much of what we do in Scotland, and as in common with the invention of so called invention of tradition in Europe as a whole. What I had read about as a student and after my degree, when the sociologists bust open if you like Scottish culture and rather suggested it was fake, and was part of a desperate sort of conceit and myth etc, like all things there's bits of truth in all these things and one of these ways that I approached the musical side was to be landed with a job in the National Museum, which is not actually in my department at all, but to do a tartan exhibition. It was a strange chance that I had to take on somebody else's job because they were on sick leave and I was recruited into this team to do a tartan exhibition just because of my knowledge of Scottish history. In fact as a student of Scottish history, and I realise I am going off at a tangent here, but topics like tartan and bagpipes were complete taboo. No one who is a serious historian of Scottish history should be tarred with any brush to do with tartan and bagpipes. So you can see where I now reside.

I was recruited on to this team to do an exhibition on tartan which we did in New York, which was a dramatic moment in my life, going to New York and working on this tartan exhibition. The point being that the first thing that struck me was that the historiography of tartan within Scottish history was desperate that everything written on tartan was

so poor, or so from one point of view, and of course they were either the proponents of tartan or the antagonists, and the antagonists were all fighting from the point of view of the invention of tradition. They were saying that tartan was Victorian fakery. Of course I came to look at piping as coming under the same influence of the very solid influence, very far reaching influence of Victorian culture and if you like the culture of empire and Britain's involvement in empire, in the way that Scottish dress and culture was put forward if you like as a secret weapon of empire. The way that this affected the bagpipes was to turn it into a military instrument, and to really narrow the tradition, really quite frighteningly. You only see that from perhaps by the 20th century. If you're able to leapfrog back to William Gunn, who I have mentioned or Joseph MacDonald you see this is something completely different, so something dramatic has happened.

I think what I was suggesting which of course was taken up in a much simpler form by the press when I published this book in 2008, was that the piping tradition had been very thoroughly influenced by the changes and fashions and obsessions of the 19th century, which really begin in the late 18th century. So they start off curiously with a very interesting influence of the Poems of Ossian and the discoveries of the Ossianic tradition and the importance of Gaelic, which then feeds Scottish romanticism, and then Scottish romanticism itself feeds if you like the needs of empire and the conceits of the 19th century. So the bagpipe much against what I had learnt, appears to have been thoroughly influenced by that and I think what was most staggering to me and I resisted the acceptance of this idea, I fought against it, but it crept up on me, but the book itself 'Bagpipes-a National Collection', grew out of the work of creating a national collection, of which there wasn't one. So that was quite difficult for me to do because there was no music department, but it was what I

managed to do with a certain amount of drive and will. I was looking for years and years and years, for ancient highland bagpipes and was mystified when I really couldn't find them, but what I found was if you like, all the wide variety of instruments which of course represented this idea of a neo-baroque tradition in Scottish piping, particularly the ancestors of the Irish Uilleann pipe, which were very common in Scotland as the so called Union pipe or Irish pipe, possibly invented in London, developed in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dublin and Belfast, but part of the variety of bagpipes and instruments of this period all disappeared in the 19th century to be replaced by this highland bagpipe. The highland bagpipe appeared to have a ready inherited and constructed history of antiquity and continuity from remote past, and yet I trying to collect the primary evidence for bagpipes and piping in Scotland, couldn't find any evidence for continuity or antiquity. I reluctantly and at a very late moment, my revelation came in 2003 when I constructed a small website for Scran on piping. This was suddenly a job that I was put on, and I had to do it all in three months, it was a very compressed job that I had to do in my spare time.

The pressure of that made me think very radically about piping in Scotland, so that I could say something more or less definite. Suddenly the coin flipped and I thought that perhaps it had never existed after all. Of course it did exist because a big bagpipe is known throughout Europe, in one form or another. The Spanish gaita is a version, the German bock, which is now extinct, and the cornemuse, old fashioned bagpipe in France. These big bagpipes existed but there was not an exclusive great Highland bagpipe really. The Highland bagpipe grows out of the big bagpipe, big type of pipe pìob mhòr, that was common to many parts of Europe. The most important thing I that I believe that instrument was refined and rebuilt in a new form, which barely existed before this in the 1780s, for the

purposes of competitions, which were founded in 1781 and ran through to the 1840s, and those competitions and the needs of competition for a uniformity of sound, and a uniform instrument which could be judged, almost reconstructed piping in Scotland. In order to float that concept, the book had as a text, or sub text, that the great Highland bagpipe, as we know it today, is a 19th century invention, or a late 18th century invention. So here we have it as part of invention of tradition broadly speaking. The tabloids or the press picked up on that hugely exciting point and was of course over simplified, you know Highland bagpipe, recent invention, totally fake, very shallow etc etc; but of course that's not really what the book is about, but I had to take that on the chin in order to get the main point across. But I think that's part of the modern world.

That's very interesting. They always say it's good to get publicity, even if it's controversial publicity.

That's right, very vulgar of me, just leap in (laughter) and as I learnt when I was in the National Museums that if you could ride it out, any publicity was good publicity, bad or otherwise. (Laughter)

One of your interests was in the growth of a bagpipe museum. How is this progressing and has an effort been made to acquire instruments and information for it in the Piping Centre, or to increase the collections in the National Museum of Scotland?

Well, I began the idea of a piping collection in 1978-79 with the encouragement of my then boss in the National Museum, Dr Robert Stephenson, whose name I would like to be recorded in the annals of piping because he was a classical archaeologist, a most unlikely supporter of bagpipes, but it was he who saw the importance of having

a bagpipe collection in Scotland and he was aware that there was only one bagpipe museum, so called, in the UK, and that was in England. That was of course tongue in cheek was seen as a national rebuke. So we had to do something about that. It was he, because I was a piper and he said "Oh, you know about piping, do something about it." So he gave me encouragement, but it was never my core work. I found there was a real job to do and from time to time I had resources to collect instruments. I went quite far afield and I bought quite a lot of instruments in the sales in London, because people weren't interested in bagpipes so much in those days, in the early 80s. I was very fortunate to buy some really key instruments between 1980 and 1986.

We also acquired the contents of J and R Glen, a bagpipe making firm, which was quite unlike core museum work, because usually in trying to form a collection, which had to be a fundamental collection of a phenomenon such as a musical instrument, such as the bagpipe, you imagine the museum would aim to acquire prime specimens. I soon became aware that there weren't prime specimens in piping and of course as I mentioned this absence of Highland bagpipes, I couldn't find any prime instruments or the only prime instruments were ones that I and my fellow musicians in the 70s and 80s were playing. In other words the old highland bagpipes weren't much older in playing form than about the 1860s or 70s. I was aware of that, that weren't any prime instruments, but we got in Glen's shop is we got fragments of instruments, which produced drones, sections of drones, broken chanters, and these fragments began to form a huge story, which has fed my thesis which I have enlarged on and have enabled me to see how the highland bagpipe or how the Scottish big pipe has changed and evolved, and how there was such a variety of bagpipes in Scotland in the 18th and 19th century. With the growth and emergence of this great highland

bagpipe, with its new identity if you like in the 19th century and the gradual failing of that neo-baroque musical tradition, all these old bagpipes, the neo-baroque, the Union pipes, passed out of existence. Of course there were some prime examples, but there were also a lot of fragments in Glenn's shop and with these fragments, this amazing story of a variety of instruments emerged. A huge variety of music in Scotland and performance and composition as far as we can tell, characterised this early period, but appeared to be lost by the dominance of the great Highland bagpipe. You can understand why it's predominant; its very robust sound and it had developed in the 19th century its own repertoire, which was a very robust, a very strident repertoire but behind it lies a more gentle and a more human repertoire.

It must have been very interesting to see the contents of a workshop, because you see amazing things that people put aside and have been dusted over for years.

I was collecting the dust off the floor. (Laughter)

Barnaby Brown is exploring the connections of Welsh, Scottish and Irish harp music and the piping the connection between the two. Is this something you also have an interest in?

Well I have a huge interest, but without any expertise. I am hugely admiring of what Barnaby has been doing in the last few years. I think it's a very rich vein of research and what appeals to me too, particularly in his area, is that because we don't actually have a live tradition for that, we have the material culture of it. We have old instruments, we have carvings, we have a small amount of manuscript material and we have analogues from other parts of Europe and the assembling of these analogues into a comprehensive story is, I think, very very exciting. I've

listened to his lecture on the Ap Huw Manuscript and I find that incredibly exciting without understanding it all of course. (Laughter) But I think it is very, very advanced and like many of these things, like my own work, it doesn't have all the answers, but I think it added a very rich element to our research and to our knowledge of Scottish music.

Who would you most admire, not necessarily as a player, but as an ambassador for the truest interpretation of the piping tradition?

(Laughter). There have been one or two people who have laboured long and hard in the course of my working life, and I would somebody like Roderick Cannon, who is a very, very thorough scholar. He has created the ground work of learned work, both in writing and in musical scores, which have supplied a much more fundamental and firmly based repertoire, historical account and so on, for our best players today. So if you like, I am stepping back from perhaps the front rank of ambassadors, because I think all the good players are very good ambassadors these days, and looking at the fact that they actually use Roderick Cannon's work to inform themselves. John Purser, also I must say, his book on Scotland's music was a great inspiration to me because he helped open up my understanding of the baroque period. Both his erudition and his enthusiasm sit very well together. Most of us who are piping are so busy blowing that we've got distending mouths and when we open our mouths nothing much comes out, in terms of speaking, but John has a ready wit and erudition and enthusiasm which I think is tremendously influential and helpful.

Patronage has always played a part in support of Scottish music through clan chiefs and British

regiments, what form do you think it should take in the 21st century?

I think anything that encourages our present student generation to play and to give them opportunities to play, particularly if they've been through the degree process at the RCS, RSAMD, here at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, or the Plockton Music Centre. We're producing a wonderfully educated class of students and generation of students and any support for them is very valuable because, as I am aware, within the last twenty years of my life when my interest has deepened and intensified, it's been so exciting to find the more obscure music being played and getting back to that variety and taste and eclecticism of the 17th and 18th century mixed with the 20th, and all the other kinds of influences that have come in, whether it's the re-learning of our own traditions through blue grass and Gospel music, jazz, all these things. It's terribly exciting. An eclectic tradition is very, very exciting. But also in Scotland when we have a well educated and learned generation of students, although they borrow and mix and fusion music – that's what I was trying to think of – fusion – they do all that, but we have such a rich tradition that they're very faithful to that at the same time. I find myself in the early second millennium, particularly when I did that small website for Scran and got involved in speaking about piping, with the changes then coming on and the early students coming out of the RSAMD and the early piping centre with very jazzy renditions if you like, and Red Hot Chilli Pipers' scene and so on, people said to me, "Oh you must be really disapproving, you as a historian of all this jazzed up piping", and I said, "Not at all, on the contrary, I think it's absolutely fantastic". Because I could detect in that music an extremely well trained set of fingers and a well trained mind, and a very good development of Scottish music. I can still whenever I want, hear any traditional music and any student here you

might ask them to play something of their own composition, a fusion piece from Spain or Cuba or somewhere, and then as you say play the traditional reel Willie Murray, they'll do that and they'll play it extremely well.

Well on that very upbeat note about Scottish piping, I'd now like to thank you very much indeed on behalf of the Piping Centre for talking to us.

Thank you. It's a rare opportunity to be asked to speak about piping without ceasing. I hope I haven't carried on for too long.

Thank you very much