



NOTING THE TRADITION

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Interviewee **Hugh MacCallum**

Interviewer **Howard Tindall**

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It's the 11th of September 2012 in the home of Hugh MacCallum, in Dunblane, Stirlingshire, with the interviewer Howard Tindall for the 'Noting the Tradition' project. Good morning Hugh.

Good morning Howard.

I'd like to start off with the early days. And you were born in Campbeltown, into a family of pipers. Could you tell us a bit about these early days and who got you started on the pipes?

Well, I always remember hearing pipes in the house, and probably my first recollections would be my father singing tunes to me. When I say 'tunes' I'm talking about tunes like John MacFadyen of Melfort, Mrs. John MacColl, Stirlingshire Militia, stuff like that. And in fact I knew these tunes before I could ever play the pipes. But when I got on to being able to start on the chanter it was my brother Ronald, who took me and taught me all the basics, the grips, the throws, the taorluath, and he took me for quite a while, until I had all the grounding, if you like. He was the only other piper in our immediate family. I had a brother, Archie, but he unfortunately was killed in a road accident before I was born, so my brother Ronald was the one who took me on.

And then after your brother, who were your teachers then?

Well, my brother Ronald was working away quite a bit, so I wasn't getting a regular lesson, so my father decided to send me to Pipe Major John MacKenzie, who was resident in Campbeltown at that time, having come out the army, and I went to John for about a year or so, before John went away to Rhodesia. Then when John left I was obviously left without a teacher, so it was arranged that I would go to Inveraray to my cousin Ronald, that's Pipe Major Ronald MacCallum MBE. At that time he was piper to the Duke of Argyll and the head gardener on the Argyll Estates. So basically it meant I went and lived with the family during the school holidays, so I got a lot of instructions from Ronnie in that period.

So would that have been tuition every day?

Yes. The days usually were spent, Ronnie obviously worked in the garden and I had chores to do as well, and usually there would some playing

during the day, I would just go out and play my pipes and he would listen in to what I was doing. But the main teaching was done really when everyone else went to bed, so it was into the small hours of the morning going through tunes and learning new stuff as far as I was concerned.

And piper to the Duke of Argyll and MBE, it sounds quite grand. What was he like as a teacher?

He was a very good teacher and very strict. There was no question of getting away with anything, everything had to be spot on, and I suppose that stood me in good stead as the years went on. He was a very kindly man, but he wouldn't stand for any nonsense either.

And with your brother a piper, your father, your cousin, what would have been the reaction if you'd shown no interest in music or decided to take up another instrument?

Well, I actually started off playing the piano, but I quickly realised I was a lot better at the pipes than I was at the piano [laughter], although I still love piano music. So I don't think I would have been too popular if I hadn't carried it on.

And I read, if I got it correct, that your cousin's teacher was William Thomson, a pupil of Ronald MacKenzie, nephew of the famous John Ban MacKenzie, and the MacCallums had this genealogical and teaching links back to a number of piping and bardic families. Can you tell us a bit more about that?

Yes. Well, regarding Willie Thomson, he was actually a piper and chauffeur at the Lossit Estates near Machrihanish, in Kintyre, and then he moved to the village of Whitehouse, further up Kintyre. I was fortunate to go through a couple of piobaireachds with Willie, one being Struan Robertson's Salute, the other one being his favourite tune 'The Unjust Incarceration.' So Willie told me that he used to cycle several miles to get lessons from Ronald MacKenzie when he, he belonged to Morayshire, he was born and brought up there before he came to South Argyll, and he was in the Scottish Horse Regiment, so he knew the likes of John MacColl and Pipe Major George Allan, and so on.

Further back in the MacCallum genealogy, if you like, the most famous one that we had in the background was a man called John McAlister, who was the winner of the prize pipe at Falkirk Tryst in 1782, and he was a very famous piper in his day, he was taught we believe, by a man called William MacMurchy, who was a bard and piper around the Tayinloan area of Kintyre, who's also an ancestor of mine. So the MacAlisters, the MacCallums, the MacArthurs, who was my granny, and the MacCallums were all linked piping wise.

And when you were coming up on the pipes as a youngster, how aware were you of this lineage, if I can just call it that?

Well, I wasn't aware so much of the MacAlister/MacMurchy connection, even though my mother was a MacMurchie, but obviously I was aware of the background with the MacCallums, my grandfather being Pipe Major of the Argyll Militia, the Volunteers, and of course Ronnie MacCallum, his brother Peter, and my brother Ronald, were all players, so if you like, it was made known to you that you had a tradition to follow.

And did this show up in the teaching you were getting or was it more in the background more, that awareness?

I think probably in the teaching as well, because there was, if you like, a particular style and sometimes settings of tunes that were, if you like, peculiar to Kintyre and to the Campbeltown area.

So you were picking up on these regional influences?

Yes. Well, I got a lot of settings of light music tunes from Ronnie MacCallum, which I still play, and which my nephew, Willie MacCallum, who's still competing very successfully, he still plays some of these settings as well, and they become accepted as normal, if you like, but they are a wee bit different from some of the, what you might call standard settings.

And you're known very much as a solo piper, but at that time you also played in the Ceannloch Pipe Band in Campbeltown, and also in the 8th Argyll Territorial Army Band. Was pipe band playing then something you enjoyed?

I enjoyed the band. My brother Ronald, was Pipe Major of the Ceannloch Pipe Band, and it was quite a young band, it was being reformed after the old ex-service band in Campbeltown, and I played with the band for a few years and then I was persuaded by Pipe Major Ronnie MacCallum of Inveraray to, he was Pipe Major of the 8th Argylls, so I was pressed ganged into the 8th, because he was trying to get a good core of pipers into the band and there were some really good players in the 8th Band. So yes, that was a period that was very enjoyable, I must say.

And what led you ultimately to decide to concentrate on the solo professional competition?

Well, I think my main objective in the solo piping was to try and win the Gold Medals, and I knew that if I wanted to do that I would have to concentrate on getting the set tunes off and spending quite a bit of time doing these and going to Ronnie and going through the tunes with him, and of course you were trying to keep this going with your normal everyday job. So I must confess I don't really think I thought too much about playing in a band that had a lot of commitments because I just didn't have the time, and I do admire people who are able to cope with both. But at that time for me I just couldn't afford time to spend in a top class band, because it is quite a time commitment.

What age were you when you moved away from Campbeltown?

I moved away from Campbeltown to go to college in Glasgow when I was eighteen, and I've not gone back to live in Campbeltown since then, so I've been away from Campbeltown now for a lot longer than I've lived there. So I had two years in college in Glasgow and I didn't do much piping then. So it was only really when I moved to Edinburgh to work in 1963 that I got back into the piping and got back in form again.

So when you were based in the Central Belt in Glasgow and Edinburgh, did that involve a change in tutor and who were you going to?

No. I used to travel to Inveraray; I would go and stay for the weekend. I was very much part of the family of course, because I had lived there

when I was younger, and I would go back to Ronnie to just make sure that I was on the right lines.

I was intrigued, I think that your ambition was that the Gold Medal you mentioned, you won the Open Piobaireachd in Oban in 1960, as I understand, at a time when it wasn't just Gold Medalists who could compete, so others could compete provided they'd learned the set tunes, you weren't a Gold Medal winner, but there you were winning at this highest level of competition. Quite a good start.

Yes. Well, I had won the piobaireachd at Inveraray Games in 1959, and that was my first big win in the open scene, and I had been going to Ronnie for the tunes and he was obviously playing in the competition and learning the set tunes for the Open. So I learnt the tunes as well and I entered because as I say, you could enter it in these days for that competition, and shock of shocks, I won that competition. So I suppose it was quite a shock [laughter] at the time for this young whipper-snapper to win against the likes of Donald MacLeod and John MacLellan and Donald MacPherson.

[Laughter] were you surprised yourself?

I was pretty surprised. I knew I'd played well, but I didn't think that I was going to feature at all amongst that sort of company.

How did others react when you won?

Well, I must say it was very well received and I didn't have any animosity, let's put it that way.

The more normal progression these days would be I think first Silver Medal, Gold, and thus to be eligible to compete in, let's call it the super league in the Senior Piobaireachd at Oban and the Clasp at Inverness. How big a jump would you say for a Gold Medal winner stepping up to this very top level of competition?

It's quite a big jump because, well, usually you're involved, you may be involved in learning two lots of tunes. You might have won one of the Gold Medals and you could be playing in the Clasp and still have two lots

of tunes to learn, and that is quite a difficult period where you have maybe two lots of tunes on the gold for perhaps years, depending on when you get the other gold medal, as we put it. It is quite a steep jump and it's one that you learn as you go along, and I was always told to listen to good players wherever they were. And I was always told that I would know myself who they were, and I was trying to do that, to learn from some of the top players at the time.

After those initial successes were you're still going back to Inveraray to your cousin to help you continue to develop?

Yes. Right through the sixties I went back to Ronnie whenever I could, and I suppose it would be possibly the seventies before our meetings were a bit less by then. But I'd had a long time with him, so I'd learnt an awful lot from him.

Right. You won a Gold Medal at Inverness I think, in 1967 when you were about twenty-five. Can you remember the tune you played that day?

Yes. It was Lament for Donald Dougal MacKay. Again, I felt I had played well, but you never dare hope that you would win, because there's a lot of good players, and I was lucky enough to win on that day, and later on that day I was also lucky enough to win the Former Winners' March Strathspey and Reel so I had quite a day of it that day.

A good day at the office [laughter].

Yes. Yes.

Then I think 1972 a Gold at Oban.

Yes.

Followed a week or two later by your first Clasp at Inverness.

Yes. I played 'In Praise of Morag' at Oban, and for my first Clasp it was 'MacNeill of Barra's' march, that was one of the set tunes obviously.

So from Open Piobaireachd at Oban in 1960, then 1972 your Clasp at Inverness, over that ten, twelve year period at what stage would you say you felt you were no longer the ‘new kid on the block’ or the ‘youngster’ shall we say?

I think winning the Gold Medal in 1967, it gives you more confidence, but it also puts more pressure on you because everywhere you go people were expecting big things. So it’s a double-edged sword really, it gives you confidence because you think well, I’m on the right lines here, and it also puts a bit of pressure on you.

What would you say was your approach each year to learning the set tunes and preparing for Oban and Inverness?

Well, the main thing of course was to decide what tunes you were going to submit, have a look at the list and pick your tunes out and then try and get them memorised, and then try and get them polished up from there, and hopefully come up with something that found favour. But it was an ongoing process year after year, you went and you played at the competitions and then the next year the new tunes came out and the whole process started again [laughter]. But it did increase your repertoire of tunes, and sometimes there were keepers, you know, tunes that you wanted to keep, other times there were tunes that you’d never play again. So it was just like that.

And someone from say a classical music background would be familiar with competitions forming part of a younger musician’s development and they’re seeking to get better known and established, but they might find it a bit unusual that in piping top flight players play against one another several times each year and year after year. For someone outside piping, how would you try to give them a better understanding of the role of competitions in piping?

Well, I suppose in a way it’s always been a part of piping, way back to the Falkirk Tryst and from there on, if you look at the lists at The Northern Meeting going back to 1841 all these pipers competing all these years. I think part of being a piper is that you play in competitions or you play in a band or you just play for your own satisfaction. If you’re into the competition scene you’ve really got to be fully into it, and I think you just

get into that way of doing things and you don't think anything else about it.

And if it's possible to make the distinction, when a piper's in competition how much is he or she competing against themselves to give their best performance? And how much are they playing against the other pipers, as it were, to beat them?

Well, I think there's always an element that you want to win. If you're going to compete, you want to win, otherwise there's no point. But I think you always try to get to the level that you're satisfied with, and a lot of that is in the instrument and your preparation of the tunes, and even how things go on the day. There's lots of little things that can combine to make a satisfying performance.

And competition can bring additional pressure and nerves for example, how was it for you playing under competitive conditions? How did it affect you?

Well, I think you've always got to be a wee bit nervous when you're competing. I think it brings out the competitive edge in you. I was nervous, I tried not to show it, and I think that becomes almost an art in itself, of giving the impression that this is no bother. But yes, you're going to be nervous, because you're up on the stage playing in front of the public, you're playing in front of judges, so I defy anybody to say that they're not at least a bit nervous.

Did the nerves, did that translate into a better performance than you would get under more relaxed conditions?

Sometimes. Sometimes it could get the better of you as well. I think it was all about learning to control the nerves to your advantage, because if you let the thing go then obviously you know you would make a mistake and that would just make you worse and it would disintegrate. Some people just find that very difficult to cope with that, and they just don't make good competitors, they can be very good players, but they just can't cope with the competitive atmosphere.

And you have a great record of success. Clasp, four times I think. Senior Piobaireachd at Oban six times. The Silver Chanter at Dunvegan six times. Glenfiddich, and success in London and elsewhere. How did you manage to maintain that for so long, year in, year out?

Well, I think it's something that perhaps you learn to live with, and you learn that first of all you've got to be well prepared, I learnt that at a very early stage, that you have to be well prepared, your instrument's got to be good, and obviously you have to have confidence in what you're doing. And if you've got these three and you can produce the music and the technique and the bagpipe on the day, then there's no reason why you wouldn't get some success if you're good enough. It's quite difficult to maintain it, as I said earlier, that when you reach a certain level people expect more of you, so it is more difficult to maintain it. And we all have, if you like, a purple patch, where in my case probably the seventies, early eighties, that you win a lot of prizes and you're doing well. And then there comes a point where you think, well, do I really want to carry on doing this? I've won this so many times So it's when you get to that stage and perhaps you might not be enjoying it as much as you were, but you decide, well, maybe it's time to say farewell to the competing.

I've been focusing on piobaireachd rather than ceòl beag, but you also won the Former Winners March Strathspey and Reel at Oban and Inverness, I think, on five occasions. Did you enjoy ceòl mòr and ceòl beag equally or one over the other?

I think the more you go into piobaireachd and the more you play it I think it takes over, it is a much bigger challenge. So I think as time goes on, when you're young you enjoy playing the light music. I still enjoy playing the light music, but you're into all the hornpipes and jigs and stuff like that. But once you get into piobaireachd and you really get into some of the maybe lesser known tunes, you really start to feel that this is the real music.

That's kept you going for quite a while now.

Yes. I'm still playing quite a bit, and I still enjoy playing piobaireachd.

Can we turn to recording your CD on the World's Greatest Pipers series, since it's probably the most readily available recording of your playing. Could I ask you how did you go about deciding what tunes to include?

Well, at the time when Lismore contacted me about that series they wanted tunes played that, that was early in the series, so I was able to include some of my favourite tunes. But on the piobaireachd side they wanted something maybe a wee bit different, so we decided to do Angus MacKay manuscript version of Mary MacLeod on that recording. And I was very much into Angus MacKay at that time, so that suited me to do that. So some of the other tunes were...

Could I ask you about Mary MacLeod just before we come to some of the other ones? Because I'd read in a piping blog recently that your playing of Lament for Mary MacLeod was mentioned along with the comment "differences from Donald MacPherson recording of the piece," and then "differences with the way Donald MacLeod had taught it in his tutorials" and "differences with the Piobaireachd Society setting." In that sort of situation you can see some folk maybe giving into one version's right or the other one hasn't the same authority, shall we say, or it shows just the richness in piobaireachd and the different sources of tunes. What are your own thoughts on the reactions?

In the case of Mary MacLeod there are several different settings of that tune. As I said to you, they wanted something slightly different from, if you like, the Piobaireachd Society norm. So I had been playing Angus MacKay's manuscript setting of that tune, so that's what we decided to go for. There are other versions of Mary MacLeod, and I still play either, what is known as the Piobaireachd Society setting, and there is also a setting that some people play that was taught by the late John MacDonald of Inverness, which is very nice as well and I like all of them. It's a lovely melody anyway that I don't think you could go wrong playing any of the settings. It's purely another angle on that melody, and I think it's good to hear different versions. And that's how that arose.

Interesting. And you begin the CD with ‘The MacNeils of Ugadale’ by Pipe Major John MacKenzie from Campbeltown, and I think you mentioned him as one of your early teachers.

Yes.

Was this by way of tribute or more?

It was. Yes. Yes. I wanted to start the CD with that tune, which was local to my area because Ugadale is just four miles from Campbeltown, and John had composed it for the MacNeil family that lived there at Lossit and John was my teacher so I thought it was a good idea to start the CD off with that tune. It’s a good tune as well [laughter].

And your nephew, William MacCallum also has this tune in the first track of his CD in the same series. Is this just coincidence or are there particular favourite tunes in the wider MacCallum family?

I think in this case it’s just coincidence. But it probably proves again that it’s a good tune since Willie picked it as well. We do have certain tunes that we learn in this, as somebody called it ‘The MacCallum Dynasty,’ because we include Stuart Liddell and Ronnie McShannon in that as well because we’re all taught from the same source. So there are some settings of tunes, ‘Ewe wi the Crookit Horn’ is one, the strathspey

‘Mhairi Bhan Og’ that’s one of them?

No. No. That’s just a slow air that I liked at the time and I put it on.

Stuart Liddell also has it on the...

Yes. It’s a nice Gaelic air. There are other tunes, ‘Willie’s Murray’s Reel’ is another one which is commonly known as the Campbeltown setting, the setting we play. ‘Captain Campbell of Drumavoisk’ is another one. And I’ve got a few other tunes that I learnt differently from the way they are played today.

And there’s a good cross section of tunes on the CD. We’ve talked about the piobaireachd; we’ve talked about MacNeils of Ugadale.

Just narrowing it down to nine, ten tracks, how did you go about, or what led you to decide the other tunes and sets?

Well, they like on these sort of recordings to have mixture of tunes, some 6/8 marches, some 2/4 marches, strathspeys and reels, small strathspeys and reels, hornpipes, jigs. Basically it was left to me to pick tunes that hadn't been recorded by Lismore on any of the other CD's. That one was the second in the series, so I suppose I was quite lucky that if it got to number twelve maybe we'd be running out of tunes, I don't know. So I just picked tunes that I liked and tunes that were suitable for the CD.

And there's various recordings of your piobaireachd playing that can be listened to on the Piobaireachd Society website, but back in the sixties, seventies and the eighties, there probably wasn't so much piping being recorded commercially, possibly due to cost, would you have liked to have recorded more if that had been feasible?

I think if it had been available, apart from the BBC broadcasts obviously that I did, there are some of them still around, I would have probably recorded a bit more. I did a recording for Stirling University and that was available, but it probably wasn't marketed like some of the bigger commercial firms. But I enjoyed doing that one as well.

And from recording, turning to composing for a moment. In 1995 you were commissioned by the National Trust for Scotland to compose a piobaireachd to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the landing of Prince Charles Edward Stuart, Bonnie Prince Charlie, at Glenfinnan prior to the 1745 rebellion. How did this commission come about?

Well, it was out of the blue really. I got a letter from the National Trust asking me if I would compose a piobaireachd for this 250th anniversary, and I was a bit taken aback at first, and I thought, well, I'll give it a go. And I thought, well, I don't want anything too 'lamentish' so there was a six note A, C, low G, A, high A, F, came into my head, theme, and I just built on that. So that's how it arose from that.

Had you done much composing before?

Well, I'd composed obviously some light music, and I'd also composed a piobaireachd called 'In Praise of Kintyre' well, that was the name they gave it, which was for one of the composing competitions that were held, I think it was in the seventies. So I'd had a go at it before, and what I did was after I'd composed it and got it down on paper I sent it to James Campbell, Kilberry, who was down in Cambridge at the time, and said "what do you think?"

And this was 'The Praise of Kintyre?'

No. This was 'Raising of the Standard.' And James paid me a great compliment; he said "I think your tune's very good." And not only did he say that, but he sent me a cassette tape with himself playing it. So that was great and he played it more or less the way I would have liked to hear it. So that was good.

Good reaction. Good first reaction.

Yes.

And was there a particular atmosphere that you wanted to create in the ground? You say you didn't want it too much 'lamentish' for example?

Well, it's quite difficult with piobaireachd sometimes to convey, I obviously thought the whole business of the landing would be a welcoming scene, maybe it wasn't, I don't know, but that's what I thought at the time, so I tried to make it a fairly light tune from the point of view of not a lot of heavy bottom hand work. So that was the idea behind it.

Right. So welcoming a salute?

Yes. Aye. A sort of salute type.

In terms of the overall structure of the piobaireachd, at the outset did you think in terms of a particular form, primary, secondary, or was it more, let's see how it turns out?

Yes. I got a few phrases together and then I just put them into one of the recognised formats, tertiary, and just took it from there, because it was new to me, or still newish to me, I didn't consider myself a composer really, but they asked me to do this so I did my best and I tried to keep it along the structural lines that one might expect. So that was really, that was it really.

I'm interested that you sent it to Kilberry, because I noticed in a section in an introduction to Kilberry a quote on piobaireachd composition and the quote is; "it's often been said that the art of composing piobaireachd is dead, certainly no good player since John Ban MacKenzie is known to have attempted anything serious in that line." So you sent it to Kilberry [laughter]. Were you worried?

That was his father of course. This was James, the son. The reason I sent it to James was I have a great deal of respect for James and his musical ability and his knowledge of piobaireachd. So I thought if anybody's going to tear this to ribbons and say this is rubbish, then it would be him. But he didn't, so that was good.

And Kilberry Senior, he would have been writing at the end of the 1940's, I think. But the likes of Donald McLeod have composed, Duncan Johnstone, John MacLellan, and I think some of the Breton Pipers. So should we view piobaireachd composition as a dying art, or how confident can we be about ongoing competition?

No, I don't think so. I think that it's been shown in the last twenty, thirty years that it's very much alive and there are people composing very good tunes. Just look at some of Donald MacLeod's tunes, look at some of John MacLellan's tunes, and the answer's there. Some of them are a lot better than some of the tunes that are lying dormant in either the Campbell Canntaireachd or Angus MacKay's manuscript [laughter].

And I'm a bit hesitant about asking this question. But what do you make of the comment by Seumas MacNeill in his booklet on piobaireachd? Quote; "it is very much easier to compose a piobaireachd than any other type of pipe tune, and like the Emperor's Clothes it can be passed off if presented with enough confidence."

Well, maybe that's what happened. I don't know [laughter]. I didn't find it easy because you have to, if you like, obey certain rules. It's a lot easier, to my mind, to put together a 3/4 or a 6/8 march. Well, I certainly find it that way and the big thing of course is to get something a bit different like all composing, in the pipes with the nine notes limitation, is to get something a wee bit different. That is the big thing, if you can do that and as Seumas said "pass it off" then I suppose you've managed something.

[Laughter] I partly mentioned Seumas MacNeill as a link into some of the debates and at times disagreements on piobaireachd that seem to go together. Kilberry some folk would criticise for inaccuracies or criticism that the Piobaireachd Society can be dogmatic or dictating the approved version of a tune. Do you have any views one way or the other on these debates that have gone on in the past?

Well, I think as far as laying down, I think you've got to look at it from the time from when the Piobaireachd Society as formed, that piobaireachd playing was on the wane and their objective was to try and encourage it again. And they decided to do this by recording in book form some of the tunes, so that they wouldn't be lost. And I think from that point of view they've succeeded. The problem is that people when they see something written on a page they assume that that's it, that you can't put your own interpretation on it or that that's the only way you could play it, because somebody's got a quaver there then that's what you have to play. And they don't use their imagination too much. The music's the thing and I think the Piobaireachd Society did a great job in saving the bulk of the music, particularly the Angus MacKay manuscript. I have a copy of Angus MacKay's manuscript here, but thirty or forty years ago I would never have dreamt that I would have that. And there are so many things available to people now with the internet, and maybe sometimes too much because some of these folk just assume things from reading it on somebody's blog on some page in the internet, and there's an awful lot of nonsense talked as well.

[Laughter]. And when you were a competing piper did you feel ever constrained in your piobaireachd playing, that you felt you had to conform to ruling orthodoxies or the views of certain judges?

Yes. Well, we used to say sometimes that if certain judges appeared that you could just put the pipes in the box and go home. That wasn't so bad by the time I got to competing. I believe it was quite the case in the fifties and the early sixties, and I've been told others by that that was the case. There were certain people of course, and I won't mention any names, that you knew if you're playing in front of them then you wouldn't have much hope of a prize, no matter how well you played.

They had their favourites or they were judging their own pupils?

Yes. Well, not so much judging their own pupils, although that happened as well, and I've tried to avoid that since I started judging. But sometimes there were certain styles that were favored and if you didn't play along these lines then you could forget it.

And given the MacCallum links back through the centuries in piping that we talked of earlier, did you find this ever put you at odds with members of the piping establishment that perhaps claimed an authority for themselves that others might question?

No. I never felt that at all. In fact probably the opposite. I always felt that what I had been taught was good and I had confidence in what I had been taught. And basically I took the view that if certain people didn't like the way I did it, then that was just too bad, that was their opinion. But I was very, very fortunate in my teaching and my background, so I always felt confident in what I was doing.

Yes. And some first rate players like Duncan Johnstone weren't that keen on competition, other top flight players like say Allan MacDonald have moved away from competition. Is that something that you ever contemplated yourself?

Well, I had I suppose, well, for twenty-five years or so at top flight competitions and I found that was enough for me, some people turned their attentions to other forms of piping, playing in a group or doing other things, and that's fine if that's what they want to do. Competition was so much of my life from ten years old that it just didn't seem natural not to be playing in a competition [laughter], and I suppose I was brought up to that as well. So I quite accept that for some people it wasn't, my brother

Ronald was a very good player, he might have competed once or twice in his life, but he just didn't like competing and he got a bit nervous and he just didn't bother with that side of it. There are lots of good players that don't compete, but I think you've just got to be keen to do it.

Yes. And piobaireachd is viewed generally as a minority taste among the general public and piping itself. Do you think more could be done to bring piobaireachd to a wider audience?

Well, probably the best way is to do is through recitals, and that's been done for quite a long time. I think the tendency is that when a recital is given by whatever piper, it tends to be a piping audience that goes to hear them. I don't know how you would get somebody off the street to go in and hear piobaireachd. It is an acquired taste and some people just can't take it, other people get absolutely hooked on it, and I mean people who have not got any piping background. So I suppose it depends on the individual. I don't know how you could, I suppose again just try to publicise recitals by a good player, and that's an important thing, to get good players to do it, because if they hear somebody who's not very good it maybe could put people off. I don't know.

And the Glenfiddich Championship shows there's a big demand; a lot of people come each year to listen at Blair Castle. But the tuning is a factor, it goes on for quite a time, it's understandable why a piper, particularly in a bigger competition, wants to get his pipes in tune and drones steady, is the length of tuning that at times goes on, is that really necessary? I'm thinking of making piping more user friendly to a lay audience.

Yes. I think sometimes it's overdone, and I think I notice it more since I've taken up judging, that some people will come onto the platform with their pipes really going quite nicely and nicely in tune, they will fiddle about with the drones and they'll end up after five minutes managing to put the drones out, and then they're fighting with themselves and the instrument to get them back in again, so that that five minutes has now gone to ten minutes, and that's when the feet start shuffling and the folk start looking out the window and so on.

So I think that's a factor. I think a wee bit of tuning is necessary to get the pipes settled and sometimes to get the performer settled, not so much the instrument, because there's a lot of good instruments nowadays and usually they're going pretty well when they come onto the platform and I think it's just sometimes a bit of nerves as well that folk fiddle around and they end up making things worse. In answer to your question, I don't think that helps, and the public wonder what's going on here? There's a guy out there that's blowing his pipes and he's fiddling around with drones and it's going on, but I don't hear any tunes starting.

Or has the tune begun, at the worse?

Yes. Exactly. Aye.

Turning to other activities in piping. Teaching is something you've been involved in over the years, so you've helped your nephew, Willie MacCallum, Stuart Liddell, I believe also, and he's also a relation as you mentioned. How would you describe yourself as a teacher?

I really don't know, you would have to ask the pupils [laughter]. I just try to pass on what I've learnt in my lifetime in piping, and hope that that is helpful to the people that come along. I've had some good players and some not so good players, and I seem to get on well with most of them. I try to approach it just that we're all here to enjoy this and try to do the best we can, and some people achieve it and some people don't, and you've just got to accept that. But that's my objective, is to pass on as much as I can of the knowledge that I have to, whether they be young ones, I have a few of them just now, or the older, more established players.

And working with the likes of Willie MacCallum, Stuart Liddell, is the elite end of the spectrum, and in contrast I was in a beginner's class that you took at Stirling University in the seventies and we were definitely at the other end of the spectrum, practice chanters toiling away. How do you manage to deal with that, or to work with these different levels of ability and stages of development and potential?

Well, of course I don't teach Willie and Stuart and Ronnie Mcshannon now, I did teach them in the past, but I haven't seen some of them for quite a while, never mind teaching them. But I think basically you've got

to pitch it to the individual and you have to tune yourself in, if you like, to their level, whether it be somebody who's learning a slow air or somebody who's going through 'In Praise of Morag,' you've just got to pitch it to their level, and with the more advanced players, then you're not so much teaching as offering guidance and opinions on how they're doing certain things, and saying things like "well, if I were you I wouldn't cut that Low A, I'd do this or" and you're giving advice there.

So more of collaboration?

Yes. And as far as, obviously if it's somebody who's just starting off or who's maybe a bit older and taken up pipes later in life, then you've got to pitch it to their level and try and take them along a wee bit, because if they see that they're making progress and they can learn a tune and they can get a tune off, then that gives them encouragement so you can step it up a wee bit and just gradually improve their standard.

And summer schools, you were involved in the Heritage of Scotland Summer School run by Stirling University, where you were the principal Highland bagpipe tutor. Can you tell us more about how that came about?

Yes. That was the late seventies. The chap who was the Director of Continuing Education at Stirling was a fellow called Robert Innes, and he was very keen to get fiddle, and piping in particular, onto this continuing education curriculum. So I agreed to help them set this up and it started, I think it was 1978 or '79, the first one, and my objective was to get the best possible teachers at the school, which would attract potential people from all over to come and learn from these people who were all well known in the field, people like John MacLellan and Iain MacFadyen and Duncan MacFadyen, Ronnie Mcshannon and Donald Morrison, so a who's who of piping. So I think that was the first good thing I did, was to make sure they had top tutors, and the thing just snowballed from there, it started off the first year Iain MacFadyen and I did the school, the second year we had to expand it quite a bit and have an intermediate week and an advanced week, and they were split up into classes of different abilities. And we just tried to move them on that week as much as we could and a lot of them, they thoroughly enjoyed it because they were getting this intensive tuition for the week and they had enough fodder to go back to keep them,

as lot of them said it kept them going over the winter, and then they'd come back the next year for more. So it was very good, it really went well, until unfortunately Robert Innes retired and he wasn't well, and we got a new regime then and some of the people at the top of the university weren't keen on what one Principal described as 'this Scottish nonsense.' So by that time the Piping Centre had started up and that took up the slack, if you like, from the summer schools, and the College of Piping also do summer schools, and there are summer schools abroad of course.

Were you doing summer schools abroad yourself?

Yes. I was doing them in the seventies, early seventies, in places like California and Texas, the USA mainly. And that was one of the reasons too that I was quite happy to do Stirling because it meant I didn't have to travel, so they were coming to me instead of the other way around.

And how did running courses at summer schools compare with the more conventional one-to-one tuition that you were perhaps more used to?

Yes. Sometimes it could be quite difficult because you'd always got at least one moaner out of fifty or sixty people, you always got one that had a complaint about something, that they weren't being taught right or they didn't like this tutor or they didn't like. So you learnt to deal with that and because I was responsible for the general running of the course I usually got them to deal with [laughter], because I didn't feel it was right that the other tutors had to deal with that as well as doing the teaching. But I must say that the vast majority of people thoroughly enjoyed it, and I still see some of them. In fact I saw one or two of the old summer school people at the Northern Meeting this year, sitting in the audience enjoying the piobaireachd. So that's good to see that, because at least we did something that the people have carried on.

Very much. And judging is something you've also been involved in now for some time. Is that limited to what might be described as the bigger and more prestigious competitions, or are you also judging at some of the smaller games?

Yes. Well, I do all. I do juniors and I do some of the games, and I'm a wee bit restricted in what I can do at the big competitions at Oban and Inverness, because my nephew Willie, is still competing, so where he's competing I don't judge. I've always done that because I felt that I didn't want people pointing the finger. Not that I need to bother because Willie's such a good player that it doesn't really matter, but I just didn't want the situation for either him or myself, for people to say "oh well, his uncle's judging so he's going to get a prize," he's going to get a prize anyway, it doesn't matter who's judging. So that means that I tend to limit it to competitions where I don't have people who I'm teaching, and this is rather a sore point at the moment with a lot of other people that some are judging where there are people that they're teaching, playing. I just don't like to get involved in that. But there are some rules around but I think they need looking at again, but that's another story, as they say.

And sometimes the views expressed sometimes in piobaireachd, that the competition can mean too much emphasis placed on the technical side and not making a mistake at the expense of interpretation or musical expression. Is there any validity in this view, in your opinion?

Well, I think basically you've got to have three elements present for a really good performance. You've got to have the musical expression first and foremost, you've got to have the technical expertise, and you've got to have a good instrument. If you don't have these three then you don't have a perfect or near perfect performance.

And if you were judging let's say, Silver Medal at Oban, would you place the same emphasis on the musical expression that you would if you were judging Senior Piobaireachd at Oban?

Yes. Although you're not going to get it to the same extent and you have to accept that from the outset, that these players are two rungs down from the top players and they're usually playing smaller, easier tunes, not that that is entirely relevant in this instance, but you do look to get musical expression again and technique. It's quite difficult sometimes when you've got somebody who can play maybe a pretty stolid tune and there's not any mistakes and most of the work is in, against somebody who plays a really nicely phrased tune and maybe has a couple of slips. So you really have to hear the whole competition and assess it all before you can

make a decision there. But sometimes it's quite difficult to balance one against the other. The conception probably is that if you get through clean without any blunders then it's in the bag, that's not always the case.

Right. So at the highest level would you expect the excellent technique and the excellent bagpipe as a given with higher expectations therefore on the musical expression side?

Yes. Yes. That's absolutely right. You're not going to expect somebody playing in that class to have problems with playing the taorluath or crunluath you're expecting them to present the tune well as a result of their experience, and you're expecting them to have an immaculate bagpipe, and very often that is the case. If it's not there then obviously you've got to assess that compared to what else you've heard that day. But your expectation is greater in the higher level competitions.

And musical expression first and foremost?

Yes. Yes. Oh yes. Yes.

So looking back and looking forward, Hugh, because I think you turned seventy this year?

That's right.

You've been piping for sixty years or more, considerable success along the way, this wider involvement in composing, recording, teaching, the summer schools, the judging. If you look back or if you had to look back, what would you say has given you the most satisfaction or would you say you're most proud of?

I think it's great when you get a young person that you've taught goes somewhere and wins a good prize, you feel very proud about that, and I think sometimes that gives you more of a buzz than if you do it yourself. Although there's nothing quite like winning the Gold Medal or the Clasp or the Silver Chanter, these are memories that stand out in your mind. And I think there are a few occasions where everything goes right, in my own case there's been a few where just the bagpipe went great and the playing went well and just everything went, and you get a great feeling of

satisfaction from that. Whether you win or not is not really, I think it's just the fact that you've achieved this, you've done this, the pipe's gone well and you've played the tune well and it gives you this feeling of satisfaction and I think that's a good thing as well.

I get the impression that it's the friendships that pipers make through piping and some of the good times they have that's also important as the piping itself. Is that a sentiment you'd agree with?

Aye. Absolutely. I've known so many, even from when I was young hearing people like Robert Reid, John Burgess, Ronald MacCallum, Donald MacLeod, John MacLellan, the MacFadyen brothers, Hector MacFadyen, John MacKenzie, Ronald Lawrie, Neil MacEachern, the list just goes on and on. It was great to be able to hear these people. I remember as a wee boy at The Kintyre Piping Society hearing Robert Reid and that was a great thing for me because I'd heard so much about this man, and when I heard him he was in his fifties and he was perhaps not at the peak of his piping prowess, but you could hear that this was an absolutely marvelous player and I was fortunate to hear that. And people like John Burgess; I formed a great friendship with him later in life, although as I say, I heard him as a young man. But I really enjoyed John's company, he was a good laugh and we had...

You were competing at the same times, so he was a fellow competitor?

Oh yes. Yes. All these people, when I started competing people like Donald MacLeod and John MacLellan, they were still competing, so I was actually competing against them, so it was quite daunting in one way, but in another way it was a great experience.

Yes. Looking to the future, do you have any particular plans or activities in the pipeline?

Well, I just intend to carry on playing and carry on teaching the young ones, and some not so young, and just keep passing on the knowledge that I've acquired over the years. I'm hoping to be able to get some of the settings of the tunes that, if you like, are unique to this dynasty that I was talking about, down on paper, and I think that's something that I need to address fairly soon.

Aye. That would be good. We've covered a lot of ground over the last hour or so. But is there anything we've missed or anything in particular you'd like to pick up on?

No. I think we've covered it pretty well, Howard. I should also mention that one of my abiding memories as a wee boy as well was, I think I was about nine years old and I'd just started with John MacKenzie and Pipe Major William Ross came to Campbeltown for six weeks on this Piobaireachd Society project where he went out to places like the Outer Isles and did teaching. So as a wee boy I used to go down from school with the practice chanter and the school bag to the Drill Hall in Campbeltown and play for this man, who must have been, I thought he was really old, but he was probably about seventy, the age I am now, and I remember him as clearly as if it was yesterday, and he would "right, play that," and he would play, and he taught me a two-parted strathsprey 'Captain Jack Murray' and a two-parted reel 'Struy Lodge', which I later learnt were in his books of course. And if you made a mistake he would say "tut, tut, you've been at the whisky." So I always remember, that always stuck in my mind. As regards anything else, my brother Archie, who was killed as I mentioned, he was a very, very good player I'm told by Ronnie MacCallum Inveraray, who also taught him, and it was just unfortunate that that happened because I think he would have been destined for big things. But hopefully I was able to plug the gap, as it were.

I think you definitely did, Hugh. I'd like to thank you for discussing all these different aspects of your life in piping, and to thank you more generally for the contribution you made to piping through your playing, your composing, your teaching and your judging. So many thanks.

Thanks very much, Howard.