



## **NOTING THE TRADITION**

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



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**Interviewee**                      **Hugh MacDonald**

**Interviewer**                     **Christine Martin**

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

**This is Christine Martin talking to Hugh MacDonald at Viewfield House, Portree, on October 26<sup>th</sup> 2012. Hugh, I've come to talk to you today about your grandfather, Colonel Jock MacDonald. Can you tell me, where was Colonel Jock born?**

He was born in Skye; he was born in this house on 7<sup>th</sup> December which is quite extraordinary because my oldest daughter was also born on 7<sup>th</sup> December. He was born in 1890.

**Was his family from Skye originally then?**

His mother's family were definitely from Skye; his mother's family were all from Kyleakin and had been for many generations and prior to that from Duntulm so they've been in Skye for a long, long time. My great, great grandfather, the first MacDonalds to be living here in this house actually came from Dingwall but the thought is that they came originally from Balranald in North Uist and the family came to Skye via Dingwall. He was alleged to have walked to Skye with a guinea in one pocket and his law degree in the other in search of a job and he got a job with the then Factor or Chamberlain from the MacDonald Estates who was an Dotair Bàn who was Macleod and a well-known man in the Highlands. He subsequently married his daughter, Johanna, which is how they came to be here in Skye. The MacDonalds have probably only been...Clanranald seems to think that he is my Clan chieftain [laughter].

**That's quite a nice thought. So where was he educated?**

He went to the primary school in Portree and he was full of stories about that, about the kids all coming across the shore from Glen Penifiler and Heatherfield and they would take their shoes off if they had any shoes, put them in the bag and walk across the shore through the mud and then get to school and try and dry off at the back of the class where they had a coal fire.

**It would have been a long walk round if he hadn't had to do that?**

A long walk, yes, imagine children walking that distance now to go to primary school. He got into serious trouble for speaking Gaelic in the school which was distinctly frowned upon at that time. You just didn't do it! My great grandfather I think was quite unusual in that he was very keen on traditional music and particularly keen on Gaelic and I think a lot of the influence would have come from my great grandmother whose family as I say have been in Skye forever. She was herself musical and also a native Gaelic speaker. My great grandfather is alleged to have put it in the servants' contracts that they were to speak Gaelic and Gaelic alone in the house here.

**That was very ahead of his time.**

Very ahead of his time, in fact, it wasn't really done at all.

**When did he learn to play the bagpipes?**

My grandfather? I think he would have learnt very young. I was saying earlier on I've got this lovely photograph of my grandfather dancing when he was probably about eight on the front lawn here with my great grandfather also dancing, and his older brother, Sandy, playing the pipes. My grandfather always said that Sandy was a better piper than he was whether this was really so or not but he died when he was fourteen so nobody really knows he existed.

**Do you know who taught him the Bagpipes at that time?**

I don't know who taught him. I suspect there are people who probably do. It might be worth speaking to Iain MacFadyen or someone like that because he certainly will have talked about that sort of thing to John MacFadyen and others.

**Was he a serious piper, did he complete in piping competitions?**

I've not heard of him competing, he may have done. He certainly judged piping and judged it a lot after he came back from India but he wouldn't have been competing at that age anyway.

**He would have been maybe when he was younger?**

Yes, when he was younger.

**Did you see a lot of your Grandfather when you were young?**

I did. My father was in the Army so my childhood was fairly nomadic but Viewfield was always home so when my father had leave we invariably came here to see my grandparents. My father died in 1970, he was only thirty nine years old and I was only just thirteen and it was from that moment on I spent more time in Skye than anywhere else. So, in an extraordinary way, I have an awful lot of stories about my grandfather and his generation and even my grandfather's father that most people don't know because I spent my teenage years living with my grandparents so I knew a lot and do know rather more than most people know about their great grandparents and so on.

**That's very nice.**

It was fun.

**Did your father play the pipes? Was it passed down?**

Well, my father did play the pipes, not to any great standard I don't think. He was certainly in charge of the pipe band in the Queen's Own Highlanders for a while. I think he was not what you might call a committed piper.

**So there was quite a lot of piping in your grandfather's house when you came to Skye?**

Always. There was always somebody here, people like John D Burgess, I remember Seumas MacNeill and others. I remember all sorts of high heid yins in the Piping world who were regular visitors and all the time and, of course, my grandfather was so keen on

making the piping competitions in the Skye Games an important event and a fixture so he had lots of people here always and I grew up listening to seriously good pipers.

**You were lucky.**

So I sometimes go down to the square or go to some view point somewhere and you think “I wish that man would tune his pipes” but I remember one particular thing which was fabulous. When I was probably about seven or eight, it was in the summertime and my grandfather had Seton Gordon from Duntulm round in the evening, it was August and it was a dull, damp, horrible midge evening and Seton was playing a piobaireachd on the lawn and my grandfather had lit little piles of peats all around the lawn so that the smoke would keep the midges away so there was Seton marching backwards and forwards, he was a very tall man, wreathed in peat smoke and it was quite atmospheric.

**It would be. That sounds lovely. Did these pipers come to stay for weekends?**

Oh, they were here a lot and my grandfather all through my childhood I remember every Friday night in the wintertime he had a little ceilidh every Friday night, and there would be whoever was around at that time and there were always the usual suspects as well, people like Donald MacMillan the fiscal who was a fiddler.

**He was from Breakish as well, I think?**

He was, the MacMillans were certainly from Breakish, and then there was Tony Fisher who was the GP in Dunvegan who my grandfather taught how to play the pipes along with Dougie MacLeod and he had some musical background but he didn't learn to play the pipes until he was in his thirties. He got quite good for a while, I don't think he still plays; he's quite an old man now.

**Did your grandfather teach many others to play the pipes?**

He taught a few I think. He certainly was an influence with Malcolm Jones playing the pipes and then subsequently Runrig. Mostly, I think it was done in conjunction with Dougie. I remember Dougie MacLeod who was a local Portree joiner; Dougie was here all the time, and he and my grandfather were as thick as thieves, they were always out up to mischief somewhere and everywhere that there was a recital or anything the two of them would be off together.

**Was that just travelling round the island, or was that off the island as well?**

Oh, off the island as well. They would go to the Northern Meeting. They were certainly travelling about.

**Was that when your grandfather was a judge?**

He was a JP but he never actually... He refused point blank to serve as a JP so, although he was a JP, he never actually sat on the bench. He said he wasn't going to try people for doing things that he was quite likely doing himself [laughter].

**What about being a piping judge, was he a piping judge as well?**

A piping judge? Yes, I remember going often to Morar and Glenfinnan, he judged there along with Seton Gordon and Angus MacPherson. Angus MacPherson was a lovely man, he was the oldest by at least a decade and I remember going, probably the last time I went with the three of them, to Glenfinnan and Angus MacPherson was probably about ninety three and we were staying at Inverailort Castle, where Mrs Cameron Head was, and after dinner Angus played the ground of the piobaireachd on a full set of Highland bagpipes which was pretty amazing at ninety three. He did die shortly thereafter, about three months later I think. He was an amazing man. The three of them used to sit there and, of course, all the pipers used to think they were asleep so they'd start to try and play the fool and they always noticed! They always knew because the three of them

would be sitting there with their eyes closed listening and you'd always get somebody who thought they would try and pull one over on them. But there are lots of photographs of them, the three of them sitting in front of the memorial there at Glenfinnan.

**Do you have some of these photographs?**

Yes.

**It would be nice to have a copy of them if you have time?**

Yes, I am sure I've got those.

**Do you know what make of bagpipes Colonel Jock had?**

I don't know what they were at all I'm afraid. I was rather afraid my grandmother would do something funny with them so I put them all in a box, locked the box up, put it away and haven't opened it, I'm afraid it's still there and I need to do it.

**Did your grandmother not like piping then?**

She wasn't desperately keen on piping. She didn't like the full set of pipes. She was quite happy to listen to him playing the wee pipes which she did a lot but I think she got slightly driven mad because my grandfather was always playing the pipes. All through my childhood in the afternoons or evenings he was always playing on the chanter, always, hours on end he would be sitting in his room playing on the chanter. The wee pipes he played a lot and these were said to have been, I can't remember his name now, Sir Walter Scott's piper, whoever Sir Walter Scott's piper was, his small pipes.

**Very nice, that's a very nice history to have, do you still have those?**

I still have them. The drones are quite split in places but it didn't seem to bother him too much. He had all sorts of electrical tape all

round the drones and I do remember all sorts of fun and games because it was long before modern bags and filling the bags with all sorts of strange mixtures and he very often put the drones on with jubilee clips [laughter] it didn't seem to bother him. I remember one particular evening when I was probably about seventeen or eighteen we went to a recital in Dunvegan and I think it was John D Burgess who was playing and after that we went to the doctor's house in Dunvegan where Tony Fisher was. We just sat there for a ceilidh and we were probably there for about three hours or more and my grandfather played without stopping for at least an hour and a half. It was all light music and old tunes that people don't know very often now. It was lovely. I have got a recording of that somewhere.

**That would be interesting to have if you've got it.**

I have got it. There are a number of BBC recordings of my grandfather. Certainly John MacFadyen had a programme called I think it was Great Pipers of the Past I think it was and my grandfather was on at least two of those talking about piping.

**Was it a tape of the one that's just been done or the special one?**

The one that was just done yes, that's a very special one, nobody else will have that.

**It could be digitised. That would be a nice thing to keep for the future.**

**You can go and have a look for it after you've revived interest in his work. Can you tell me anything about his life in the Army?**

He was never a regular soldier. Because he retired as a Colonel everybody thinks he was but he was a rugby player and he played for Scotland in 1911, a game against Wales, and I still have the photographs of that, in fact, I've still got his original rugby shirt and the cap. After that match, he was told it was time he went out to earn his living because he broke his leg which finished his club rugby



playing career at that time and he went out to India in 1911 to work for his uncles who had tea estates at that time and they were MacKinnon uncles. Then, of course, War broke out in 1914 and he came straight back as a lot of young men did and, of course, got off the ship in Southampton, went up to London and joined up straightaway. He joined the first regiment that was available at the time which was the Inns of Court Regiment in London and then subsequently transferred to the Camerons. He never spoke about it; these men never spoke about the War. He spent time in the trenches for a while and then because he was a linguist and everybody realised he was a linguist because he had been brought up bilingual, he'd then gone to India and he'd learnt Urdu and Indie and various other Indian dialects and someone in the War Office put two and two together and realised that Urdu is derived from Farsi which is the Persian language so in the latter half of the First World War he was pulled out of France and sent to, it was called in those days, Mesopotamia. He went off there and the job was to chase around Reza who was the late deposed Shah of Iran's father and keep him on the move so that he couldn't be of any use to the Germans. So, in the latter half of the First World War he seems to have spent his time buying Persian rugs and polo ponies [laughter].

### **He would have enjoyed that.**

He did get quite ill at one point. He got what was called a retroperitoneal ulcer which very nearly killed him I think. He was in hospital in Baghdad and when the doctor did his ward rounds at night, this chap walked round the wards and said he'll be dead in the morning, he'll be dead in the morning, he'll be dead in the morning, and he looked at my grandfather and said he would be dead in the morning. My grandfather said "I won't be dead in the morning" to himself and several weeks later when he was being discharged, he'd got better, he went off and sat in the Registrar's Office waiting for the Registrar to give him his discharge papers so he could go back. The Registrar was an Indian doctor and disappeared off and my grandfather did what everybody does left in an office, he was getting bored so he just read the papers sitting on top of the desk from behind

it, upside down, and realised that what he was looking at was his own death certificate. It was complete and filled in; a death certificate signed by the doctor, the only thing that was not completed was the time of death [laughter]. So, he asked the Registrar if he could have this and the Registrar got a bit upset and said he couldn't have it. Eventually, because my grandfather was persistent, he got given it with a cancelled stamp on it [laughter]. He had that here but, of course, the dog's made a nest with it in his bedroom and it's got eaten I think. He attributed this retroperitoneal ulcer to sand in the Australian whisky which was the only thing to drink they could get hold of in that part of the world at that time. He didn't think much of Australian whisky!

**Did he do any piping when he was there or did he have his chanter with him?**

He would certainly have had his chanter with him. He was never separated from his chanter so I'm quite certain he did. I've seen one photograph at any rate of him piping in India. When he was in Persia, Mesopotamia, various Middle Eastern countries have their own forms of bagpipes, he collected quite a large collection of bits and bobs of strange bagpipes, again, which I still have. Unfortunately, I don't know what they are but there are various sets of strange pipes which he picked up.

**I asked you earlier about education you said he went to Portree Primary School, where did he go after that?**

Fettes in Edinburgh and he would certainly have been taught pipes there. I think he had rather a good Piping tutor in Edinburgh. So that's where he went.

**Did he go to university after that?**

Yes, he did. He used to say he went to both. After school he went to Oxford and then during the First World War he was sent to Cambridge to learn his Farsi, that's why he said he went to both.

**He was very well travelled [laughter]. Did he write any tunes?**

He did. He was always diddling away, quite a few people know about it, there's a book that was published by Duncan MacLeod of Skeabost which had tunes that were my grandfather's and Dougie MacLeod's, the local joiner in Portree. They were thick as thieves, they did everything together but one particular tune in here which I remember very well was the Muscovy Ducks and I can remember him actually diddling away with it when he was writing it and the whole concept was that you were making the noise [noises] like the ducks sucking up the bread from the milk, so it was good fun. I don't know of any other tunes that he wrote that were published but I'm sure he did.

**What sort of date was that book published?**

It must have been published in about 1971 or 1972, shortly after my father died. It doesn't say in the book when it was published. I'm sure I could ask Duncan but it was certainly after my father died because there was a lament to my father.

**So was it mostly new tunes then?**

They were all new tunes and they were all sort of quite topical. They were all people that I remember and knew – Ann Clifford, Bruce McGhee and D C Macleod of Stornoway. Defeat into Victory, I wonder who wrote that? My grandfather was in Burma in the Second World War and Field Marshal Slim wrote a book called Defeat to Victory. It was written by my grandfather. My grandfather had a great deal of time for Field Marshal Slim who was known as the "Forgotten General" when he was in Burma. He wasn't a regular soldier but after the First World War he went back out to India again and worked as a tea estate manager. These chaps had a very short civilian career, only about nineteen years, and then he was back again into the Army and the Second World War. In the Second World War he was technically too old because he was fifty-five and I think most people were not called up if they were over fifty but because he was a

linguist they wanted him and he ran a pioneer corps of mostly Indian labour building roads south through Burma as they got rid of the Japanese. He managed to keep everything together, all his sort of personal possessions, and then he was going into Rangoon and crossing the Irrawaddy and the raft tipped over and he lost everything that he everything that he'd had with him all through the War.

**I can imagine that he was upset. I heard that he'd met at one time Màiri Mhòr nan Òran?**

Yes, there is rather a well known story about that. He used to tell that at all the ceilidhs when he was Fear an Taigh. Màiri Mhòr lived at Skeabost which is not all that far from here, if you walked over the hill from here, it's only about four miles and when he was probably eight or nine years old, maybe slightly younger than that, I am not quite sure when she died but I think she died in the late 1890s, and he had been there with his father. My great grandfather was supportive of Màiri Mhòr and he'd been there with his father and he decided one day that he would take off on his own and go there and he vanished from this house. Nobody knew where he'd gone and eventually two and two was put together and he was out at Skeabost and some wee boy came running into Màiri Mhòr's house and said "there's a big man outside looking very angry in a top hat sitting on a coach" and Màiri Mhòr was alleged to have lifted her skirts and hid him underneath. He said he was nearly asphyxiated [laughter]. All was forgiven later but she was hiding him for a while.

**What can you tell me about his sister, apparently she was very active in promoting Piping and Scottish music generally in Skye too?**

Toonie was. She was known as Toonie, all these ladies had nicknames.

**Why was she called Toonie?**

I have no idea. It's a very odd name but her proper name was Johanna. Actually, the gates in the Parish Church in Portree are for her but she had..., I think, again, with her father and mother's influence, she had always grown up with it. She was one of those people who could pick up any instrument, she was incredibly musical. The whole family were very musical and I remember her as an old lady playing a Jew's harp but she was quite elderly when I knew her. She died when I was five or six. She was a dreadful driver, she had an old black Rover car and I remember it coming up the road and the crashing of gears and that sort of thing. She was one of those people, a bit like my grandfather, with our generation you put the car into whatever gear you wished to travel in and then you slip the clutch, so the engine would be screaming but she was stone deaf, the car would be moving and she wouldn't hear it but she was very keen on piping. I think she set up the Skye Piping Society and she was...music was very much a family thing. I think if you go to the Archive Centre there's quite a lot in there about Toonie setting up the Piping Society. Calum MacLean knows quite a lot about it because he read it all which I haven't done I'm afraid.

**I heard that Colonel Jock was involved in the Penny for the Piper at Boreraig. Can you tell me more about that?**

Oh, very definitely. I used to go to that every year with him and that was a lot fun. We'd go and...There was a piping competition held at Husabost and there was a tradition that the Martins had given the land at Boreraig to the MacCrimmons for a penny and a piobaireachd which was their rent and that tradition was sort of revived by the ???Martin and Seumas MacNeill of the Piping Society.

**When was that revived?**

Probably in the early seventies I would think and I remember an occasion when that was filmed by the BBC and Seumas MacNeil arrived in a helicopter which was an awful lot of fun and as a sort of cheeky youngster, I had never seen a helicopter before in my life, it looked rather fun, and they were going to go and film and fly around

Dunvegan Castle and take a film of that so I managed to hitch a lift. It was a beautiful day and we flew across the loch.

**Do you know when that originated, that they revived it?**

They revived it...The story was that when the MacCrimmons had been the tenants at Boreraig that this was their rent and that because the Martins were very close cousins of the MacLeods at Dunvegan anyway.

**And Iain MacFadyen did also revive it, he used to take the school pupils but I don't know if that happens any more now. My son, he was younger then, he used to love it, he used to love it. That was the Martins' house**

Yes, they did love it. All the children loved it and it was in the house but the house became increasingly dangerous and I think it has very serious dry rot. The floors used to give way every now and then and I think it just all got too much. [30.22.5] Martin is still alive but he is in his late nineties I think but the house is fairly shambolic.

**It was a nice tradition to have though.**

It was, I think it was a lovely but it just got too much for them. They got too old and it was too much to continue.

**Your grandfather was involved in that.**

He was very much involved in it, very heavily involved in it and took a great interest in it. The other thing he did a lot with was he was heavily involved in the Cadets in Skye but then that sort of subsequently went into a further interest in piping and setting up the Isle of Skye Pipe Band after the War.

**He was involved in setting up the Isle of Skye Pipe Band as well?**

Yes, he was the President of the Isle of Skye Pipe Band for years along with shinty. All these things were his passions, shinty as well.

**Do you have any other anecdotes about Colonel Jock that people would find interesting?**

Oh, I'm sure there are many but you've probably heard enough driven from me for one day.

**It's interesting to hear the stories about your grandparents.**

He and my grandmother were an extraordinary couple. They used to...How they remained together I have no idea. My grandfather used to refer to my grandmother as suffering from morning hate because she was quite evil in the mornings sometimes and he was always quite convinced she talked too much! Certainly on one occasion, somebody was coming to tea in the afternoon and my grandmother had gone out to feed the owl, you may have heard of that, he had an owl for years which everybody locally will remember, it lived in the shed out across the lawn there, and, of course, when my grandmother went to feed the owl the door blew shut behind her and the wooden latch dropped down so she was shut in the owl's house where she remained, and she was bawling for help, and my grandfather was, of course, ignoring it completely. Someone came up the drive, it was somebody who was coming up for tea, and they said, "Jock, what's that noise?" "Oh, it's only the old trout, she's shut in the shed but she can stay there for a little longer" [laughter].

**That wasn't very kind.**

No.

**The Colonel Jock Memorial Trust was set up after his death to promote piping and generally Scottish Music in Skye. Can you tell me more about that?**

It was largely the Vice-Admiral Roddy MacDonald who was a very good friend and he was involved with the Highland Games as well and Roddy really liked my grandfather, they got on very well together, so it was Roddy's idea that there should be a Memorial set up after he died. Roddy ran around and arranged for the initial capital which was designed to produce an income for the Trust. Of course, for the last eight years, it has produced no income whatsoever and so it's become rather difficult but it was a... The concept was good and rather like the Husabost Show I think children really enjoy it. I think it's something different, you're not playing in a faceless hall somewhere and it's a lot of fun. I hope it doesn't become too much of a burden but I still enjoy it. I enjoy the fact that I meet lots of the kids and lots of local children and I really enjoy them growing up and then coming back again and there are people now like Iain Ruairidh Finlayson who's playing here and is now teaching at the school.

**They're judging it now and they were former pupils?**

Yes, people like Hector Henderson, Susan Naylor with the fiddle and all those people. After thirty years it's a little bit difficult because you know people are that much more divorced from knowing who my grandfather was and what he was all about. So the younger children particularly, they don't have any idea, whereas the ones who were initially involved certainly did. They knew all about it.

**It keeps his name alive. It's a memory to the teachers and pupils.**

But he did a lot for traditional music generally in Skye I think. He did do a lot so it is a good idea to keep it going and he did enjoy it. I don't know my childhood... Certainly I still walk past his room every now and then and in my head hear him playing on the chanter. I still do that.

**That's a lovely note to end this interview on. You've been very helpful and it's been very interesting so thank you very much, Hugh.**



Not at all, Christine, I enjoyed it.