



NOTING THE TRADITION

An Oral History Project from the National Piping Centre



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Interviewee Iain MacInnes

Interviewer Jonathan Graham

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This is an interview for ‘Noting the Tradition’ conducted in the BBC studios, Glasgow on the 30th April 2012. The interviewer is myself, Jonathan Graham, and I’m interviewing Iain MacInnes. So thanks for speaking to me, Iain, today.

That’s quite all right, Jonathan. It’s nice to see you.

Aye, you too. So I just really want to go from the start, start at the beginning.

Right.

So how did you get into piping?

Well, that is quite a long time ago. I actually grew up in the Far East, out in North Borneo and Brunei, so there wasn’t much piping to hear out there. Brunei at that time was a British protectorate semi-colony, my father was a Director of Education out there, but because it a British Protectorate, British Army regiments used to come through occasionally and we used to see the Gurkhas and they also had a pipe band. And I remember one year the Queen’s Own, or possibly they were still the Seaforth, this was back in the sixties, they came through, which caused great excitement because my parents were both from the Isle of Lewis, the village of Gravir on Lewis, so the Seaforth’s or Queen’s Own, probably as it was, I can’t quite remember when the Seaforth’s amalgamated to become the Queen’s Own, their pipe band came through and there were loads of people from Stornoway in Brunei at the time.

So that’s when I first heard pipes, and I started learning pipes at a boarding school, again because my father was in the Colonial Service, as it was known, the thing that was done in those days was kids were sent back to the UK for education, so I was at a prep school, in other words, a private school, boarding school, near Huntly called Blairmore School, in a place called Glass which was a few miles outside Huntly. And an option there was to learn pipes, and I had an older brother, who very sadly died very recently, six weeks ago, and he’d been there before me and he learnt

the pipes, so I just basically thought that's what he's done so, I'll give it a go myself.

Follow in his footsteps kind of thing.

Yes, very much.

So what age were you when you heard the band back home, the Queen's Own?

In Brunei?

Yes.

Well, I would probably have been about six or seven, or five, six, seven, that sort of age.

Did that stick in your head, and that's why you maybe wanted to pick it up later?

It did. It did. I suppose the other band I probably did hear was the Lewis Pipe Band, because again a feature of the Colonial Service was that every three years, people in the service didn't really get long holidays, but every three years they got a six months furlough, home leave, so they came home for six months every three years. So the family came back to Lewis and we were leaving in Stornoway in fact for the six months and the Lewis Pipe Band used to parade every Friday night I think it was, down at the harbour, and they played at the Lady Lever Park just outside Stornoway, you'll probably know the tune.

Aye, I know the tune. Yes.

So that made a big impression and like loads of young kids when you see and hear a pipe band you just think that's a wonderful thing, wonderful sight, they had all the gear, the feather bonnets and so on.

Was it the full number ones, was it?

Yes. The pipers wore glengarries, but the drummers had feather bonnets. And the Skye Pipe Band used to come up every now and then and they got together and it was probably a fearsome noise, but it looked great.

[Laughter] Aye. So at boarding school when you said you took up pipes following in your brother's footsteps, what age were you?

Well, I would have gone to that school at about eight, so probably about eight or nine. We were taught by a chap, I remember him as Mr. Forsyth, but I think his first name was Colin, Colin Forsyth, and I think he was ex-army, he was with the Huntly Pipe Band, so he used to come out once a week and teach us and he was very rigorous, old style army tuition, learning scales correctly.

So was he quite hard on you then, yes?

He was hard, but he was quite a nice guy, in fact he was a very nice guy, but a methodical approach, which worked very well because I enjoyed that and it did lay the good foundations I think that was the way that, and I think it still is the way that people learn, isn't it, to be honest, get the basics right. Then when we got onto tunes I think we were probably working our way through something like the Scottish Pipe Band Association Blue Tutor, that had some tunes in it, some nice simple tunes, and then probably the old Seaforth Highlanders' collection, the pre-Queen's Own Highlanders, collections like that, and the Scots Guards collection I suppose would have been on the go at that time as well, after the 1950's, I think that was published.

So how many years was it that he had you under his tuition?

Well, I would have been at that school, it was a primary school effectively so I would have been with him from eight or nine until thirteen. Then I moved on to another boarding school, I was a product of that lifestyle, the colonial lifestyle of the kids, while your parents are away overseas you're left at boarding school really for your education, and I went to Glenalmond College in Perthshire, and I was very fortunate there, they had a pretty active afterschool pipe band, but really by a fluke, there was a guy on the staff who was Jimmy MacGregor Senior, you'll probably know young Jimmie MacGregor who died last year.

Yes. Yes.

Young Jimmie's dad who was just a tremendous character, he'd been a Pipe Major in the Gordon Highlanders during the Second World War, in fact I think he was one of the youngest Pipe Majors in the army at that time, he'd served in North Africa, El Alamein and these sort of campaigns, I think he ended up in Germany, and he'd grown up, if not on the Balmoral Estate, certainly near it, and he was one of the pipers on the Balmoral Estate with Bob Brown and Bob Nicol. Do you know much about Jimmy? When I was at school he would have possibly been in his sixties when I was at Glenalmond, and he actually won the Gold Medal at that point in his life.

I see. That's quite late on for a piper, isn't it?

It was, and I imagine it was because of the war and his working life intervened and after he'd left Balmoral he'd been a gillie on the, I think Earl of Airlie's estate. So Jimmy's great skill, he was a professional gillie, if you like, he knew how to look after deer and he knew how to fish, he knew all these things that you do on an estate.

A very traditional sounding guy.

Very much. Just the same lifestyle as Bob Brown and Bob Nicol.

Right. So he is very experienced in things with the piping and passed that onto yourself?

Yes. Well, he had a great reputation as a character, and he was a real character, he was a very amusing guy. He was a tremendous piobaireachd player, but I think possibly his biggest reputation was as a march player, and he looked great on the boards, he was tall, very elegant straight backed, and he marched on the boards, not back and forth, he always marched in a circle. And he won the big competitions; he was as good as anyone in his day, made his own reeds as well, so he knew his way around the instrument.

He was good when he was teaching me, he ran the school pipe band, which I don't think anyone would claim was tremendously good, it was okay for the era, a slightly different era because often the private school pipe bands are good in this day and age, aren't they, you've got Dollar Academy and Watson's and bands like that, in those days that wasn't really the case. But he did help nurture one or two players. One was a chap who was at school before me, he'd gone by the time I was there, and that was Duncan MacGillivray, who a bit like myself went onto become involved in folk music. But Duncan did something which I never did which was also compete and he won the Gold Medal himself, as you're probably aware.

One thing I will say about Jimmy's teaching, march teaching, he just embraced a very fluent style of playing and he was always likely to emphasise the off-beat, he'd always have you thinking about the off-beat, so it wasn't over melodramatic, he was marching, he really marched his marches.

So was Jimmy MacGregor your biggest influence then?

Yes. I would say in terms of Highland piping, just straight Highland piping, without a doubt, and after I left school because I didn't pursue a competition piping career like so many people do and so many in my generation did, I didn't actively seek out teachers particularly, although I did meet one or two people. So I would say Jimmy was the main influence, he had loads of tunes, strathspeys, four parted strathspeys and things, he often played them in a slightly different way and I wonder if it possibly, just actually different arrangements of quite common tunes, slightly different arrangements, so they weren't the standard Willie Ross style arrangements which more or less everyone plays nowadays in competitions, but those five books of Willie Ross are the ones that really have hit the mark.

Have become the standard now.

They have become the standard, haven't they, they've become the piper's bible. So Jimmy had lots of lots of interesting little arrangements, possibly reflecting where he grew up in the North East, Royal Deeside, possibly the pipers around there were just playing slightly different

arrangements or tunes. I did meet other people along the way who were good to me, but I wouldn't say influenced me enough to change my playing style. One was actually Donald MacLeod's brother, because by my teens my family had moved back to the Isle of Lewis, so my holidays I used to go to Stornoway from the village of Gravir where we lived, and Donald Macleod had a brother called a Angus, who's actually the Pipe Major of the Lewis Pipe Band, that he said to me 'If you want to come up to the house and get a couple of lessons, please do.' Which was what I did. He was known as 'Boxer' or 'Angaidh Dòigheal'. 'Dòigheal' I think was just the family nickname of Donald and his father, just a piping family, a well known piping family the whole lot of them of course.

It's funny, it's Donald MacLeod that's always gets the fame, isn't it? You never hear much about his brother.

Well, I don't think Angus competed or anything like that, to my knowledge. Donald, of course was in the army which drove his career. I suppose Angus would have been a bit younger than him, I guess he would have been. Donald served during the war and then stayed in as a professional soldier, which allowed him to really develop his talent, and also gave him the opportunity to go to all the competitions. I suspect pipers of their generation, we're talking 1940s- 1950s, making the trip to the mainland to go to competitions, that was a big expedition, it cost a lot of money. Times were harder, financially harder.

So going back to Jimmy MacGregor, your main influence and teacher, what was his style like? I know you said about the 2/4 marches, I know there's different styles of reel playing, a lot of the styles back then were rounder than what you've got today. Is that the way he played?

I think I'd have trouble remembering, to be honest. And Jimmy's not a chap, working here at the BBC I'm in a position to hear loads of recordings of old players, but I've never really dug out any recordings of Jimmy. I think he did broadcast quite a lot, but in the days before recordings went on tape they basically went out live. And possibly Jimmy might have had some old recordings. I think he did compete a lot, so he would have been quite well geared up for competitive piping, but as I said he had loads of nice little arrangements of tunes. He was also a lovely

singer and he loved quasi opera and things like that. And he was full of tall stories, some of which were even true.

[Laughter] Would it be fair to say that you're seen more now as a, or known more now as a small pipe exponent rather than a Highland piper?

Yes. I'm sure. I would imagine.

How did you get into the small pipes?

Well, I think it was partly coincidence and partly I think my interests, after school I went to Edinburgh University, kept the piping going in the university pipe band, which is an OTC pipe band, Officer Training Corps. But like quite a lot of people in my generation we were influenced by the Irish folk groups coming through, Planxty, I went to see Planxty a couple of times, with Liam O'Flynn playing the pipes. The Bothy Band. These were the big folk groups of that period. And I liked that sound and just by coincidence that the early eighties was when there was effectively the start of a revival in Scottish small pipes, as Hamish Moore and a few other people decided that there was something here to be explored, and I was just ready at that time to, I wanted to find an instrument that I could play in a folk group context or with other musicians.

As it happened I ended up playing Highland pipes for a few years with the Tannahill Weavers. But I did folk music-wise, but we did incorporate small pipes into that sound as well, and we were probably one of the earlier bands to attempt to do that. But I think, yes, to answer your question, I suppose if I'm known for any playing it's probably more small pipes, because that's what I focused on and probably what I do better, because I'm not playing the Highland pipes quite enough.

So you played with the Tannahill Weavers. You mentioned that. And Ossian as well.

Well, I played in a brief and late line up of Ossian, which actually came out of; we had a little trio together. Just to give you a bit of chronology if you'd like that. I joined the Tannahill's in I think, now, let me get my dates right here, about 1985.

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Right. That's what the internet says as well [laughter].

Good. At which point I was doing a research degree at Edinburgh University, and I'd done a year of that. And Alan MacLeod, who was the original piper's piper with the Tannahill's, he'd decided to pack it in at that point, so they were looking for a piper, and it was Phil Smilie I met, possibly Roy Gullane as well, at the Edinburgh Folk Festival and just at the time as it happened they were looking for a piper. So I joined them and played with them for about four years, took a bit of time off to write up the thesis I was working on, at which point Gordon Duncan with the band for I think about a year. Then I went back to the band, the Tannahills, for two or three tours after that, and then I came to work here at the BBC in fact. But after that I wanted to keep playing, but I didn't have the time to play full-on full-time, so we started a little trio, which we called 'Small Talk' and that was, a fiddler who I had played with in the Tannahills, a guy called Stuart Morrison, and a lovely singer called Billy Ross, who was in the original Ossian line-up, the original band when they started off as Ossian. So that was a little trio we had. And actually musically that was much more small pipe orientated, it was quite a gentle, laid back, acoustically self-contained sound, so it was quite a balanced sound, you didn't need a PA system to make it a good sound.

Quite different to the Tannahills then?

Yes. The Tannahills were louder and more energetic and needed a PA system to get that full throttle sound that they wanted to get. And that Small Talk line-up, Billy Jackson joined us to play harp and that briefly transformed itself into a line-up of Ossian. And we did actually make a CD with that line-up. But we were actually known as Small Talk for slightly longer than that. And that was a group I very much enjoyed playing in. It was just a trio and it was easy and simple and just straightforward and nothing complex about it at all.

Aye. Did you guys make an album with Small Talk?

Yes.

You did?

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I'll sell you one.

[Laughter].

It was just called 'Small Talk' actually.

Right. And then you did one with Ossian as well.

Yes. Small Talk in about 19, I should have the dates here. Small Talk 1995. That's right.

Was that your first album then?

No. Well, I'd done some recording with the Tannahill Weavers, three of their CDs. The first one was called 'Land of Light.' In fact Dougie Maclean played on that one.

So that was your first one, so that was in 1980?

Yes. That was, gosh, 1986. The following year, I know these dates because I've got them written down here [laughter] it's not that I remember them, the following year we made a, well, it was an album in those days, there were no CDs. In 1987 we made an album called 'Dancing Feet' which was probably about the best of that era of Tannahill Weavers. And there was one called 'Cullen Bay' in 1990. But you must remember before that they'd already made four or five recordings, actual very well known recordings, I would say the early 80's was a point in their career where they'd really become very well known, they were quite a household name at that point, and they were touring an awful lot in Germany and Holland and North America.

Okay. So that was your folk band background. Have you got any other folk bands you've played with? Or even presently?

Well, I have played here and there. I made a recording with a band called Cainntearachd, Cainntearachd they called themselves, which was Ross Kennedy, just a kind of working band he had to go to festivals and things. Ross played in the Tannahill Weavers as well.

Is he a bouzouki player?

He's a bouzouki player and a guitarist, and singer in fact. I suppose the most recent thing I had a go at, we got a little trio together with Mairi Campbell, who's a beautiful singer and fiddler, and a woman called Jen Clark, who was in the original line-up of the Battlefield Band, not the original line-up, but very early line-up with the Battlefield Band many years ago.

What does she play?

Well, she's a singer and she plays guitar and she's a very nice dulcimer player, lap dulcimer, mountain dulcimer I suppose, which you don't really see featured in bands nowadays. It's quite interesting how instrumental line-ups have changed quite a lot, in these early bands you used to get certainly dulcimers, bouzoukis have just appeared on the scene, and you used to get things like auto-harps and things like that. That's quite a nice sound and I actually quite enjoy the bands that have a nice string sound, that there's a nice blend of guitar, harp, bouzouki, that sort of thing, and Ossian, in the classic Ossian line-up with Ian MacDonald playing pipes and Tony Cuff and Billy Jackson and George Jackson, that was very much their sound and it was gorgeous.

What about your own albums? Is it Sealbh and Tryst? Tryst, is that right?

Tryst. Yes. I made Tryst in, when did I make it? In 1999. I made Sealbh exactly ten years later, so 2009. It was just really because I was busy at work and I wasn't able to go out and play a huge amount that that time, although we were still playing around folk clubs and things like that, Tryst was really just a chance for me to explore some things musically, again focusing pretty much on small pipes. I think there were a couple of Highland pipe tracks in there, and it was very much folk group music, so it wasn't solo piping, it was instrument splendid to create a sound that varied from track to track, but the ones that had a consistent theme going through it was the piping sitting square in the middle of it all.

So I enjoyed doing that and the one thing about making these sort of albums, you don't need to be the, if you've got a nice sounding instrument

and you know exactly what you're playing they're not really expressions of great instrumental virtuosity and they're just satisfying albums to play on and to make. And one thing about doing it yourself is you're creating a sound that you enjoy hearing yourself, whereas if you're playing in a band context it's not exactly a compromise, but a coming together of ideas.

So those are the two solo albums you've made then. Have you made any more than that for yourself?

No. Just Sealbh came out a couple of years ago. I did it 2009. So the next one will have to be 2019. If I'm still playing.

Seven years away. Okay. What about the other couple of albums? You've played in a few albums I know, but the First Grand Concert of Piping, that must have been a good thing to be involved with, that concert.

Yes. Well, that came out of the Lowland and Border Pipers' Society, which is the one piping society that I've personally been involved in as a member since it started, and it started, well there's some debate about when it started, but it started in 1981 really, I think it was formally constituted as a society in 1982 or 1983, and obviously as the name implies it was there to promote bellows pipes. It's quite hard in this day and age to remember that in the early eighties it was very hard to get hold of instruments and designs were just in a very nascent stage.

Colin Ross and Hamish Moore got together to decide what sort of instruments would work well and they were experimenting with size and key of chanters and things like that, initially using Northumbrian pipe technology. But here we are in; well, how many years later it is, is it almost thirty years later? Yes, over thirty years later, there's so many makers now, and I mentioned Colin Ross, there were other makers, Robbie Green of Herriot and Allen. But actually the impetus was coming from south of the border, it was Northumbrian pipe makers who are driving that revival, at least in terms of actually making the instruments. I think in terms of music that was being pursued it was the people north of the border, the membership of the Lowland and Border Piper Society, and other people who were just interested in the sound. I can't remember what your question was actually. I'm on a bit of a detour there.

No. That's fine. That's great. It's was just about your other albums you've played on. So that was one, The First Grand Concert of Piping.

That was promoted by the Lowland and Borders Piping Society at a time when Hamish Moore I think was President. He's President again actually and Hamish is a very dynamic individual and he's very good at getting people together and creating events and recording them. And a similar one was one he did in Pitlochry about five or six years ago, which I think did come out as a CD called the 'Piper and the Maker.'

I was going to ask you about that next.

And I think there's another two or three Grand Concerts of Scottish Piping. So certainly these concerts of Scottish piping and the Grand Concert of Scottish Piping, they were driven by the Lowland and Border Pipers Society, and in particular during Hamish's presidency of the society, chairmanship, I should say.

I really like the CD, it's something different. So the Piper and the Maker, that was the same idea run by the same society?

Well, no. Well, similar idea, but actually that was Hamish's own enterprise and the idea there was simply for players who used his instruments, all to come together on the stage at the same time, so all the instruments were made by him, that was his idea. But a nice variety of players and styles on it, which I think is the attraction of these CDs and playing quite a nice variety of instruments as well, which makes them distinctive from highland pipe CDs where the instruments themselves obviously they vary in quality, but the basic sound doesn't vary too much. It was hard in those days with reel to reel recording, as it was.

Did you do quite a bit of that when you were younger?

Well, actually when I started working here at the BBC everything was still analogue tape, and we learnt to edit on actual editing blocks with a razor blade and sticky tape.

Oh yes? When was that then?

[Laughter] Well, it wasn't all that long ago, it was about, well, 1990 I started. So we didn't really digitise for another ten years after that.

So that's when you first got involved with the BBC, in 1990?

Yes.

And it was straight into recording and sound and that area?

Well, I kind of came in doing more little packages, presenting little bits and pieces for the Piping Programme as it then was, and also some of the other more traditional music orientated programmes. At that point I'd been in the Tannahill Weavers, I was just finishing off a thesis at the School of Scottish Studies at Edinburgh University, so I think they were aware of the fact I'd been doing historical work on pipes, so that's how I came in. But once I started working here I was more on the production side of things, working in production. I did some presenting as well. I presented the Piping Programme here for, well, probably about ten years, jointly initially with David Murray; we'd take it a week about.

So did that turn into Pipeline or is that a different show?

No. It was the same show, it just changed its name and became longer and had a slightly looser format to it. In fact the programmes here can be traced right back to the 40s, there has essentially been a piping programme on air on a weekly basis more or less since then as far as I'm aware of.

That's great when you think about all these recordings, you can still listen to them.

Well, as far as recordings go there are a couple of things to be said. Early on everything was live pretty much, so people who came in as a featured player would have performed live on air and that stuff wasn't retained, at least not beyond a couple of months after the actual broadcast. It wasn't really until the eighties that stuff started going down on tape, pre-recorded onto tape, at which point some of the recordings were retained, but not all of them. It was a kind of selective process and I'm not entirely clear what

criteria were applied and it might have been just as simple as taking a sample of what had gone out. So that most of the archival stuff that remains, dates from the eighties onwards.

I see. I see. So you were involved in the presenting of that programme before it was called 'Pipeline' for about ten years?

Yes. I think it became Pipeline about halfway through that period, so mid-nineties. And in fact I was concentrating more on pipe bands at that point and David Murray, Colonel Murray, he was concentrating on the solo piping and the bigger piobaireachd performances and that sort of thing. In fact there was, I don't imagine you'll remember him, but there was a chap called George McIlwham who used to present before I did, he used to look after the pipe band broadcasts, and George was, when I say 'was' still is, he's still alive and in his eighties, he was a professional flute player and piccolo player in the Scottish Symphony Orchestra.

Right. What was the transitional point between being a presenter of the show and becoming a producer?

It was just circumstance really. They just needed a producer in the music department here. So for a while I was doing both, and then I took a year away from the BBC in 1990, sorry, in 2003, I'm getting my decades mixed up there, and did some research work at the School of Scottish Studies, where I'd been earlier, it was just to give myself a break. Actually Rab Wallace and Gary West came in to present at that point. At the end of the year Gary carried on presenting and I came back, just straight on the production side of things, and it's been great working with Gary actually, it makes a nice team because he's very knowledgeable and he's a nice easy going chap to work with.

Personally I worked on Travelling Folk, which was a folk music programme for quite a long time, several years, as a producer in the 2000s, late '90s, 2000s, and that was a good time for me because it was probably a time in my career where I was very well versed in what was going on musically in Scotland, I mean really well versed. I knew all the bands and I knew all the CDs. And we had a fair bit of a budget to make these sorts of programmes, so we used to have a lot of the bands coming in and performing and they were good times, it was interesting meeting people

who were often people you admired from an early age coming through performing, so it was great.

That sounds good. So what else was I going to ask you? Can you talk about your thesis you did through the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh? What was that, 1988?

Well, I finished it in 1988. And I'm glad I did finish it. What happened was I actually went to the School of Scottish Studies, I'd done a geography degree at Edinburgh University and I was all set to go to Canada to pursue geography at Guelph University as it happens, but I just thought about it a bit and I was aware of the School of Scottish Studies, they hadn't really been doing undergraduate degrees to a large extent prior to the 1980s. So I graduated I think in 1982, but I had a cousin who worked at the School of Scottish Studies, called Joan Mackenzie, Joan was their archivist and translated Gaelic tapes into English and actually archived them. So I was aware of what the school did, so I approached them to see if there was scope for doing a research degree on piping, which I'm not really sure anyone has done any full blown academic research on piping at that point, not really that I'm aware of. And at the school there was a chap called Peter Cooke who was an ethnomusicologist, so he took me under his wing. Peter, himself a very interesting man who was a proper musicologist, he'd spent a long time out in Uganda and I think he spent quite a lot of time, he certainly did some research out in the Indian subcontinent, so he was into what you might nowadays call 'world music' well before it became a commercial entity. And he was in there at grassroots level; he'd lived and worked in Uganda.

But when he was teaching in Scotland I think he did a thesis on Orkney or Shetland fiddle playing, but he became interested in piobaireachd and just in the early eighties he'd started looking at piobaireachd sources, and interviewing people like George Moss up in Kessock who had quite a radically different style of playing to what we would regard as the common modern style of playing, and Peter was invited to the Piobaireachd Society conference and delivered a couple of very interesting papers about really as a musicologist looking at published sources and manuscript sources such as the Eliza Ross Manuscript from Raasay in I think 1812 or 1816, she was the granddaughter of the Laird of Raasay,

who noted down music from John MacKay, the family piper, Angus Mackay's father.

And Peter was looking at what Eliza had actually written on the manuscript and comparing it with modern interpretations and drawing his own conclusions about introductory cadences and things like that. So he took those when he was interested in piping, and what I did, I actually focused on a period, well, I focused on the Highland Society of London and Scotland records, because they were sitting up at the National Library, and people had certainly been through them, I know people like Keith Sanger had looked through them in some detail, and there was some at the National Library, The Highland Society of Scotland records were and probably still are at Ingliston where the Royal Highland Showground is, the main house out there, the Royal Scottish and Agricultural Society records.

So I use them as a prime source material and just really discussed the evolution of Highland piping from the 1780s, 1781 when the first competition started through to 1844, which was the time that the competition moved from Edinburgh, or stopped in Edinburgh effectively and was taken on by the Northern Meeting up in Inverness. So although the thesis was quite focused on the Highland Society, so I used it as a sort of template or base that I could discuss the wider piping scene as I understood it. Actually I think that research stands up pretty well and there were one or two things that, some of the detail I might have got wrong, but I think the broader ideas I came up with were perfectly valid and it was enjoyable doing it.

So what do you think of that looking back on that now, with maybe, I don't know, fresh eyes, fresh mind and stuff. What do you think of it, the whole paper, do you ever look back through it and think, oh, I said this at that point, and I think this now?

Well, to be honest I don't think my, really it was more historical than musicological. Although Peter, being a musicologist he did ask me, require me effectively to actually go through some of the early published sources, Angus Mackay and Donald MacDonald, and actually Joseph MacDonald, discuss the notation style to some extent, but from my point of view I think my greater interest was in the actual historical background

to the production of these collections, and the cultural context in which piping evolved at the time. I think it's a subject that has been for instance, William Donaldson's book covers similar ground and I know there's other people looking at it, the same sort of subject matter as we speak today. There's always more to be discovered, but I think it was reasonably valid work at the time.

So you're saying that was one of the first papers like that on piping to that extent?

I think it possibly was. I can't off the top of my head think of others. Alan MacDonald did an MLitt at the School of Scottish Studies shortly afterwards, and there were quite a lot of postgraduate students there at the time looking at various aspects of Scottish musical tradition, traveler music for instance. So it was a good environment in which to be working, and the school at the time it was quite a good core membership of postgraduates who were interested in Scottish musical culture, and out of which some useful work came I think. But not for me to, it's hard for me to judge work like that myself. I think it was useful. It's certainly useful for me and I know other people have looked at it and probably drawn their own conclusions from it.

So if people come to you to speak to you about what you did for their own thesis, say Simon McKerrell or Decker Forrest, they used your knowledge to complete their own.

Well, Simon was on a slightly different tack. Decker as well actually, because Decker was focusing very much on the light music repertoire and notation styles and what conclusions we can draw from the notation styles. I think the work I did, it's just useful that it was done and people can always refer to it, but the wealth of academic knowledge of piping is transformed from 1980 to the present, there's been three or four major publications, you've got William Donaldson, John Gibson, Hugh Cheape, all these sort of people, and they've covered a lot of ground.

And actually one person I would put a word in for is Pete Stewart who's not an academic as such, but he's been very interested in the non-Highland piping traditions, Border pipe, Lowland Border piping effectively, and he's published two quite big collections, not just music, but also his

interpretation of the music and the historical context of the music and he's done that off his own bat, without any academic kudos in doing it, but it's really good research. So there's loads of people out there interested in that sort of work. So I think our state of knowledge has moved on a lot.

Some would argue that knowing about all that stuff doesn't make you a better player and that's true, but it can inform the discussion. It can inform the discussion. One thing I would say in a sense the work I've been doing here I've been observing the piping scene, and in many ways because of the fact I'm a producer, in many ways the performance of those I've enjoyed performing, but it's not been that huge a part of my working life, and I've been forcing it to live through a very interesting and impressive period I think, in which we've been blessed by some great players and I'm always surprised that my contemporaries, after I left school and certainly after my first couple of years at university, I didn't really compete because I never saw it as something I was particularly good at and was keen to pursue other musical interests. But a lot of the other people who did start competing that that time, my contemporaries, are still playing and they're still playing at this remarkably high level, so Willie MacCallum and Roddy MacLeod, Fred Morrison has gone on and done his own thing, and we had Gordon Duncan and Gordon Walker and Angus MacColl, and they're all still, well, obviously Gordon Duncan isn't, but they're all still playing at a remarkable level, great longevity. I think players who had come before them were, you had equally brilliant players, but I suspect the 1980's marked, well I shouldn't say but, I think and the 1980's marked from a historical perspective a slight shift, certainly in one respect in the way the instrument sounded.

Donald MacPherson as you know died ten days ago, and he was a guy very much associated with creating a modern Highland pipe sound where the scale of the chanter's were working pretty close to the scale of a piano. But I can remember players of certainly Donald's vintage who were playing quite a radically different scale, a sharp D and F sometimes, and sometimes a sharp top G and then there was a little phase you'd hear in old recordings where the High A was often very flat, seriously flat, uncomfortably so, and that was obviously just a fad, a phase that people were going through in the 70s.

And really pipers of that older vintage are now largely gone and they've taken with them also loads of interesting playing styles. We've played on the piping programme on a Saturday night about Donald Macpherson playing strathspeys, he's playing Delvinside and it's very remarkably different from how it would be played nowadays on the competition platform. He was playing a very cut and dotted style and it's great, just rhythmically fantastic. So I think it's been an interesting era really, the last forty years.

Well, you'll be well positioned to make that judgment I suppose. With your position behind the screen here in the BBC with you doing the Pipeline show, what do you think of the young players today when you're comparing them to what you've just spoken about, Donald MacPherson and even Roddy, Gordon Walker, all these guys?

Well, the young players today are fantastic, skilled, and I think the really big difference is since the RSAMD started a Scottish degree course and the school at Plockton what's it called again? The Centre of Excellence in traditional music, since they started, you do get pipers coming through who are just multi-instrumentalists, or certainly are very, very, very competent on more than one instrument and that was a rarity. Donald Macpherson had it and a few other people did, but it didn't, I don't know, possibly because opportunities to learn more than one instrument weren't really there if you go back to the sixties and seventies.

So that is a difference. I think in pure piping style the quality is as high as ever. Pipe bands, the quality of sound that they're producing is infinitely superior, there were great sounding bands, there's absolutely no doubt about that, if you go back to the early eighties, the Shotts and Dykehead and Muirheads before that, and of course the Strathclyde Police. But of course they were exceptional, nowadays you can get Grade 3 bands that are producing a fantastic tone out of the instruments, and that's without a doubt to do with the technology that's available now, the bags and the plastic reeds and whatever else. And I think people have a bit more money to spend on their instruments and the quality of materials they're using and so on.

Do you think that's been a big influence on the pipe bands and the solo piping, the influx of these more synthetic materials?

Yes. Less so the solo piping, at the top level the solo piping has always just been people with tremendous instruments, without a doubt. Pipe bands, I would say so. Yes. It's curious, when you look back at the early eighties, what I can remember of it, Strathclyde Police winning six in a row and so on, but they were playing, it's quite a small pipe band, I can't remember how many were in it, but it was about twelve or fourteen pipers, so modern bands are about twice the size.

The 78th's a few years ago, thirty I think, thirty pipers.

Well, exactly at the World's? Yes. The 78th Fraser Highlanders. Possibly an experiment that wouldn't be repeated because it wasn't entirely successful. As they're quite candid to say, a person on one side of the band can't hear what's happening on the other side of the band, you just can't hear it. And pipe bands have changed a lot and their repertoire in the early eighties was fairly straightforward and up till, and you probably know the history of this better than I do, but up till possibly about 1970 in competition the Grade 1 bands entered three MSR's, three march strathspeys and reels, and the medley idea didn't really take off big style until the early eighties, and that's when bands started getting to grips with it and experimenting and seeing what they could do. And that engendered a bit of interesting arranging and composing, I think for pipe bands that hadn't been there before.

Yes. Well, we've talked about the advancement of solo piping and pipe bands. What about the, obviously you're well positioned as well to talk about the folk bands because that's your main background, so what do you think of the folk bands today? And are we speaking about Rura earlier on, which is quite a fresh band.

Yes. Again quite different. I think music goes in phases, and the seventies and into the eighties, in fact it was the singing groups, well, 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, it was the Clancy Brothers in Ireland, and then the Corries and the McCalmans, it was the singing bands that were the big bands, it wasn't really until the Bothys and Planxty and one or two others came along from Ireland, the Chieftains, I suppose, that they'd have instrumental music as entertainment per se in its own right. That took off at that point. But even the Tannahill Weavers, it was 50/50, a lot of songs in the repertoire and they were singing in McCalman style three part

harmony, four part harmony, so that was very much the style. Bands, when the Tannahills started there was a band before them called Alba, have you ever heard of them? Not Clan Alba, but Alba.

Yes. I've heard of them.

And the piper's Alan MacLeod and the fiddler's Mick Ward, and they both joined the Tannahills as it then existed in Paisley and the band took off at that point. But they had an empty goal in front of them because no one had really been using pipe music as a basis of a repertoire to build a performance repertoire out of. It had been used but not to a great extent. So the Tannahills could record a tune like the Atholl Highlanders and it was new, incredibly new, thirty-five, forty years ago. Whereas now it's the most well-trodden and hackneyed piece of music that you could imagine, it's a great piece of music. So they could really just draw on the pipe music repertoire and everything sounded fresh. I think nowadays actually the bands are going in the direction of just creating their own music and doing it beautifully. I think we've set a lot of great stuff with great subtlety. Bands in those days you tended to, if you were in a band you were kind of stuck with it, there weren't that many bands about and you went on the road with a band and that was it, that was your lifestyle and that was in fact your work, and that sustained you. I think nowadays there are more bands, each band probably doing fewer concerts over the course of the year so players have to play more different line-ups to make a living out of doing it.

Is that right? So back then that was your lifestyle, playing in the band was your main income?

Yes.

Because it seems these days folk groups they're always saying, I couldn't make my life, I couldn't make my money from this. They have to be doing other things, other projects, albums, blah, blah, blah. Different things. Why is that then?

Well, I think it was your work for a few bands. There are a few that made a decent living out of it. And there are the ones that you probably, most of them are still going actually, strangely enough the Battlefield Band, the

Tannahill Weavers, Boys of the Lough, Capercaillie and those sort of bands. So they'd built up, they'd taken ten years to build up a concert circuit, a touring circuit that got good agents in North America and in Europe. But for them, for every band like that I suppose there are loads of others where it wasn't your day job. But that's a choice you had to make, whether you wanted to commit full-time to it or not. There weren't as many instrumental musicians about in those days in Scotland. There has been a revival, that's the truth. There's possibly fewer singers now of the same standard as there used to be, but there's certainly a lot more instrumentalists.

Thanks for your time, Iain, on behalf of the National Piping Centre and Noting the Tradition, thank you very much.

My pleasure. It's been great fun.

Thank you.

