



## **NOTING THE TRADITION**

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



Supported by  
**The National Lottery**<sup>®</sup>  
through the Heritage Lottery Fund



**Interviewee                      Iain MacKinnon**

**Interviewer                      Christine Martin**

**Date of Interview              20<sup>th</sup> December 2012**

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**This is Christine Martin from Noting The Tradition. I am with Iain MacKinnon today at 13 Upper Breakish, my home, Isle of Skye on 20<sup>th</sup> December 2012. Hello Iain, thank you for coming to my house today to talk about your piping history. Perhaps you could tell me a little about your piping and who taught you to play.**

Initially I was taught by Andy Stoddart who lived at Pipers Cottage in Broadford, he was an old army piper and he taught a few of us. But then I wasn't really progressing until the school's instructor came in 1969, who was an ex army piper called Farquhar MacIntosh and he was doing the whole of Skye and he taught quite a few of us. And there were some of us joined the army in the end. Four of us at the time and only two of us sort of really stuck it for any length of time. Well we got taught in school and then we got extracurricular classes on a Monday night as well.

**And who did those?**

Farquhar MacIntosh himself.

**Right. So he did extra tuition for you?**

Yes, aye.

**And did you get free chanters?**

Aye, well we all had our own.

**You all had your own, yeah.**

We all had our own, aye.

**So what age was that when you began to play?**

With the school instructor I was 13, I suppose it's pretty late, but 13 years of age.

**And who was the other person you said went into the army from Broadford?**

A guy called ... actually there was another two, there was a guy called Alistair MacRae, Skye his nickname is, he went to the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards and a guy called Donald John MacLeod and myself who joined the Scots Guards.

**And did you know Graham Richardson from Elgol who was also interviewed for this project?**

Yeah, I met him a few times. I remember him on the odd occasion going down to my uncle's workshop in Broadford and they'd be talking away about piping. And I met him a few times while I was in the Army and then after I left the Army as well.

**Because he mentioned an old shoemaker, Ruairaidh MacGregor in Broadford who taught pipes and sometimes helped to learn a tune. So did you know him and did he help you too?**

He helped me quite a bit. He was born in Eynort on the west side of Skye in 1915. And when he was three he contracted polio and slipped and paralysed from the waist down. And then he went to a special school in Edinburgh for about 10 years.

**Was that because he had polio?**

Yes, with the polio, disabled kids, aye. And so he came back. By this time his family had moved down to Strollamus just near Dunan, north of Broadford, because his dad was a gamekeeper to Lord MacDonald, so they'd moved from Eynort down to Strollamus. So Ruairaidh came back after about 10 years down in Edinburgh. And he couldn't understand a word what his parents was talking about because he'd lost all his Gaelic like you know, and they couldn't understand him neither because of the Edinburgh accent. But he seemed to pick the Gaelic back up again. And after he came he learned to play the pipes, he taught himself.

**So he didn't learn any pipes in Edinburgh then?**

No, he didn't learn any pipes in Edinburgh. I was asking my mother there today, did he learn from a book or did he learn from any individuals that

were piping ... well, in the south end of Skye. And she said ... my mother said there was no pipers around at that time. So I assume he learned from a book. But he never told me, he always told me he was self taught. But he was a really, really good player. I remember when I was a kid he'd be churning out reels at an incredible speed like. And about ... it was about the early 1950s, his family and Rudy moved from Strollamus down to just beside the wee pier – the wee pier of Broadford, a wee house there. And in that period he learned a bit about cobbling and watch repairing as well. So he got a wee workshop built beside the house and the years after that was just a sort of ceilidh place really, you'd get people coming in, pipers would be piping there a lot and singing as well, storytelling.

### **A proper ceilidh house.**

Yeah. Yeah. And certainly ghost stories as well because I mean any kid my age in Broadford say in their 50s, they were always going down to his shop and he'd be ... he had a good ... there was no word of truth in the stories. But he must have had some imagination like you know, because these kids believed him and they'd be walking home on a winter's night. There was no street lights in those days as well like. I don't think they came in until about early 70s. So there'd be many a frightened kid walking home from his shop you know, that night like you know, these nights.

### **And did many pipers, other pipers go in there, I mean lots of people from here?**

There was ... well Graham Richardson, also the school instructor as well and Andy Stoddart he'd be in as well. And there was another guy, he had a nickname and I can't for the life of me remember it. He wasn't Skye, but he was from the mainland but he came up on holidays and B,B,B, it began with B, I forget his nickname. And Willy Fraser as well, he'd call in as well. It literally used to be mostly the same faces.

### **And what do you know about Willy Fraser because Norman Stoddart mentioned Willy Fraser?**

Aye, what I remember of Willy Fraser, I was ... I'd have been nine or ten, I think it was really sort of before I picked up the piping myself, but he'd be

in the shop and he'd have been in his 80s then, he was an old man then like. But he'd be diddling away, you know, humming a tune, he'd write it down on a cigarette packet like, he was a smoker too. He'd write all his tunes down on a cigarette packet or a box of matches like, you know, yeah. And yeah, it was just a very nice atmosphere like, you know.

**It sounds it, it sounds really good.**

Aye, yeah.

**And do you know where Willy Fraser would have learnt or was he a local person to here?**

That, I never found out, I assume it maybe was probably in the Army maybe, and maybe he was in the First World War or ... I never found out myself.

**And what about Andy Stoddart, he mentions Andy Stoddart, Norman mentioned him when talking about Kenny Stoddart, he used to live in Black Park, did you know anything about him and his piping?**

What I learned was that he was a piper in the Army in the Second World War. And I think he was the 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division, but I'm not sure if it was before he got captured at St Valery in Northern France or after the 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division got reformed. So I don't know if he was a prisoner of war or not, but he was certainly a piper, I think it was the Camerons he was in like you know. But he was very strict Andy like you know you wouldn't get away much with him like you know. He was certainly a very nice man like you know, but the atmosphere around the table was certainly...

**Was strict.**

Strict, aye.

**Can you tell me anything about the style of teaching you were given?**

I think we weren't aware of any particular style.

## **You wonder who taught Farquhar MacIntosh?**

I mean the majority of my initial interest in pipes and any ideas I'd got about playing, expression, was through Farquhar MacIntosh and that would have been the army style, the style that he learned in the army. But I remember when I joined the army though, I got told not to play so round. And I was just told more to point, then especially march, strathspey and reels, to point the tunes like, you know, as I was playing them too round.

## **So who would have taught you in the army?**

Well the pipe majors there at the time, initially it was when I took my training at the Guards Depot in Pirbright in Surrey, was a man called Arthur Gelvin, Scots Guards, he was a Scots Guards Pipe Major, he was teaching at the piping school in the Guards Depot Piping School. And from there it was, when I joined the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Scots Guards from my training, that was a guy called Dixie Ingram and he's still in the army.

## **He's still teaching people?**

Well yeah, he's still there, aye.

## **So where were you educated and have you always lived on Skye apart from your army time?**

Yes, I was born in Uig, because there was no hospital in Broadford at that time, at the end of 1955. But I was brought up in Broadford, educated at Broadford, at the Broadford Junior Secondary School, where the vets is now, and joined the army at 15 when I left school as a boy soldier. Well I worked for about three months in MacGregor the butchers and then joined when I was about 15, almost 15½, as a boy soldier and spent two years at the Guards Depot in Pirbright in Surrey as a boy soldier. And then when I was 17½ moved to my battalion in the Scotch Guards and joined the pipe band.

## **And you've got a good Skye name, it's a Skye family you're from, I mean it's originally a Skye family?**

Yes, my father was and his people were from Luib just north of Broadford and my mother and her family are from Eynort in the west end of Skye, yeah.

**And what then, anybody else in your family, does anybody else play the pipes or is that why you wanted to learn?**

My dad played the pipes after a fashion. He tried – he tried his best like you know. What really got me interested was when the schools sort of came and you could get motivated and there was a wee school pipe band going as well like you know, so it was all good fun at the time like you know.

**And were you involved in competitions?**

Yeah. Well did sort of local competitions up in Portree and all that, you got the odd first year in there like you know.

**And Skye games and things?**

Aye, Malcolm Jones the Runrig guitarist, he was playing the pipes at the time and he was always winning the top prizes there like you know.

**It's not always the winning the prizes, it's just being there and practicing the tunes.**

That's right, aye.

**What make of pipes do you play?**

At the moment, I've got a set of Lawrie pipes, they were made in 1903 and I bought them off a pipe major, Angus MacDonald, he's now ... he died a few years ago. He was at the Army School of Piping at Edinburgh Castle at the time. And I bought them off him in 1979.

**Right, that was nice buy then.**

Aye, it was, aye.

**Okay. And do you play any other kinds of pipes, like small pipes or...**

No, none at all, just the great Highland bagpipe.

**Right. And I know you were an army piper because you've told us about where you went for your training, but can you tell me what it was like to be an army piper?**

It was great fun. I mean you had to be a soldier first and then a piper like you know, so you did a fair bit of soldiering which I tried to avoid as much as possible like you know, but that was part of the job. But it was good fun being a piper because you got abroad more than the rest of the guys in the battalion. I've been to about 22 different countries. The last place I was in was Colombia, I was teaching the Colombian navy, they've got a pipe band on the north coast of Colombia, a place called Cartagena. And now and again they get a British army instructor out to teach a band.

**That was an interesting one.**

Yeah, and there was a band after a fashion like you know, I had to get them ready for the Independence Day parade up in Bogotá, and it was hard work, but we got it at the end, aye.

**You got it. And I heard that you'd been in the Falklands war, were there any interesting things that you can tell us about that time?**

Oh, yeah, yeah. Well I was attached to G Company in my battalion and towards ... well a lot of stories, but the night before the surrender we had to attack this mountain called Tumbledown Mountain. And so you have a forming up point before you attack. And so we left the forming up point and then the start line and then you head towards the enemy like and it was pitch black except for flares going up in the sky. And so I had my ... I was carrying my pipes at the time and you try to be as quiet as possible. And the ground was covered in snow and there were potholes all over the place like you know, so I kept falling in these potholes and landing on top of my bag and the drones would sound, you know. And the guy in charge of us, "Do that again and I'll shoot you, you know." But we got there in the end like.



**You have a nickname here locally of Albie, could you tell us how you go that and what it means?**

Albie is short for albatross, when I was in the school in Broadford, a lot of us had bird nicknames, for example, there was penguin, seagull, I was albatross and then I think I said that some of us joined the army, four of us joined the army and some of us joined the same unit and the albatross nickname carried on in the army and then it got sort of abbreviated and shortened down to Albie and it's been with me ever since.

**And can you tell us what you're up to now, do you do any piping now or teaching, or what do you do?**

Yeah, I teach kids at the moment just on a small scale, just I'm teaching ... well I work night shift anyway, so I teach three kids at the moment and I think that's enough for me, because if I taught anymore I probably wouldn't give it the sort of same commitment. But I teach the three kids just now and they're getting on fine like you know. And I enjoy it as well because it keeps your own hand in like you know.

**And do you do any playing, do you play at weddings or...**

Aye, any usual weddings, funerals, just the usual.

**So you're still well in practice and still fingers on the pulse?**

Yeah, yeah, yeah, I still keep practicing as well, yeah.

**So can you tell us any other anecdotes or anything from your piping career?**

Oh boy! Yeah, like well when I first joined the army, you'd do these you know, like army training exercises, you know, exercises on the soldiering side. And you'd be living out in the field for maybe two or three weeks and then we'd always culminate on a dawn attack like you know. And the company commanders liked the pipers to play into the attack like you know, and the rest of the boys would go and fire the guns and you'd be playing in the middle of them. And I remember there was this particular exercise and it was a dawn attack and it was still dark. So we were all in

an extended line and I think it was my first actual exercise in the battalion and we were all in an extended line, you can just see the shadow, the silhouette of the guy next to you, but all we could see was this bottle getting handed along like you know. And there was me thinking it was coke like you know, just a bottle of coke, just sort of slake the thirst. And so I got the bottle, took a swig of it, it was dark rum like you know. And I think I was only about 17 at the time, and it was quite a shock to the system at the time like you know, and it was a good attack after that.

**I bet it was.**

Aye.

**Well thank you very much Iain, for talking to me, that's been very enjoyable and nice listening to your stories and the history of various pipers in Broadford, thank you very much.**

Thank you very much Christine.