



NOTING THE TRADITION

An Oral History Project from the National Piping Centre



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Interviewee **Ian McKerral**

Interviewer **Christine MacKay**

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

Project – National Piping Centre

Name – Noting The Tradition

Interviewee – Iain McKerral

Location of Recording – Iain’s home in Campbeltown on the 11th of April 2012 at 3.45

It is recorded on a Marantz 661 digital recorder supplied by the National Piping Centre. There could be background noise from the clock and from traffic.

Interviewer – Christine MacKay

That concludes the ID for this interview.

Iain, lovely to meet you here in Campbeltown in your home. Tell me about your life, were you born in Campbeltown?

I was born in Campbeltown in 1961 and went to school at Dalintober Primary and then on to Campbeltown Grammar. I started learning the chanter in primary school by the then Mr Peter MacCallum, who was actually the janitor of the school, and that’s how I started my piping career.

Right, the janitor taught the piping?

That’s right

Good. Has Campbeltown a strong piping tradition?

Yes it has always had, I believe the Campbeltown Pipe Band dates back over a hundred years at the moment and it’s always had a lot of good pipers coming from the town.

Good. What was the special reason for that? Was it army service or people of the town who were very talented or families that were pipers?

Yes, I think a lot of it was to do with the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. The pipers always in the past learnt from the army scene.

So you started your early school life piping at the age of?

Ten

Ten. Then secondary school?

I carried on through into secondary school. Actually Peter MacCallum, the guy who started us off; we went to Peter, there was a few of us, three or four of us went to Peter for private lessons also. Peter unfortunately took ill after about two years tuition with him and we moved on to the band in Campbeltown, which was led by Dougie McShannon. Dougie was the pipe major of the band and Dougie gave me my first set of pipes. I always remember that. Then the band at the time changed hands. There was new pipe major came in called Tony Wilson, and Tony's history, he was a Campbeltown man who went to the Scots Guards and then the Glasgow Police and came back to Campbeltown and had worked at the local shipyards here.

Right

So Tony had a good pedigree in his piping and he took over the Campbeltown band.

Excellent

So I started going to Tony for solo tuition as well and competed as a boy piper, in under eighteen around the games and it was quite a lot of travelling, coming from down here in Campbeltown.

Of course, Campbeltown is far away from everywhere.

That's right, aye it's quite isolated.

So what were your strengths of solo piping?

Probably light music. Tony learnt us some of the smaller piobaireachds and we did compete in that, but my strength was probably the marches, strathspeys and reels hornpipes and jigs, you know. Also, the band was a big thing as we were younger you know. I remember Tony, I was probably fifteen at the time, and Tony came into the band hall and said that he had been up to see Paul McCartney for the Mull of Kintyre

Wow

and of course we all thought, he was a bit of a joker, Tony, you know. We were all having a laugh. He says no, he says we have got six weeks to get this wee tune off before we go up and he is going to record it, the song that Paul McCartney had written; him and Linda McCartney. So we duly learnt the tune. Tony had put it in pipe notation and learnt it on our way up and we did the recording and the very first attempt Paul McCartney said that's it, we are happy with that. I remember it just from that. It was a great night. We ended up staying up at his farm for a good three or four hours.

So you met Paul McCartney?

We met Paul McCartney, aye.

And this tune was?

The Mull of Kintyre, which obviously went to number one.

So Campbeltown Pipe Band was at number one.

That's right, in 1977 we were; it was really a very exciting time and it put Campbeltown and Kintyre on the map.

And did it attract more pipers into the band?

Not really, because it was always a local community band, so it never really did that. Although it did kind of build the band up obviously

It did

to a world known band, you know status. We were obviously on Top of the Pops and we went down to London and recorded an album. We were on the Mike Yarwood Show Christmas Special. I mean, it did last a good year anyway and the band

Wow. So were the band financially rewarded for all of this?

Yes. The band wasn't sponsored by Paul McCartney, but as far as I am aware; I mean I was only a boy at the time; the band was well taken care of and we were also given a fee for our performance on the record.

Was that quite unusual to receive a fee?

Well a lot of people said that we should have got the royalties, but as I said, I don't really know what went on because I was only a boy in the band.

Yes indeed

I was quite happy with the fee that I got paid for my part in the Mull of Kintyre.

Excellent

It was just a privilege to do it, you know just to play with such a superstar.

I am sure I won't interview many pipers who have that on their CV.

No, maybe not [laughter]

So have you stayed in the band ever since then, yes?

Well I stayed in the Campbeltown Pipe Band until I was maybe about twenty/twenty one, and then I moved away to Glasgow. When I left school I worked at the local shipyard. I did an apprenticeship, I was an engineer. Then I left the shipyard to go and train as a barber, believe it or not. My father had a barber's business, which I always wanted to work in anyway, but my dad being the old school said no, go and get a trade and then if you still want to do it you can come in. Anyway, unfortunately my

father died when I was twenty and I decided to give the hairdressing a go. So I went to Glasgow and I stayed there for a year. While I was there I played with the Babcock Renfrew Pipe Band

Right, ah good

under Pipe Major Jim Henderson. They were a Grade One band. So I did my year, played with them for a year and then I came back and then I went back into the Campbeltown Band. By that time Tony Wilson had left the band. He kind of resigned, he left and there was word of a new band going to be starting up in the Campbeltown area. So this band; without going into too much detail, this band was formed, which I joined and I became the pipe sergeant of the band under Tony, Tony took over. The leading drummer was a guy from Glasgow who moved down here, he worked at the Largy Sawmill, called Billy Clarke.

The Kintyre District Band was formed with a lot of the members from the Campbeltown Band. The Campbeltown Band did survive, but at that time the Campbeltown Band were really not competing too much and there was a good group of younger pipers like myself who were keen to get competing. So that was really the reason the Kintyre District was formed. There was a lot of politics in it that I will not go into too much, but anyway the Kintyre District started competed in 1985 in Grade Four and within three years we had got to Grade One.

Excellent

So it was really quite a feat, right through, straight through the Grades, Four, Three, Two, One, in three years. Unfortunately at the time, it was about 1989 when we got to Grade One, Billy Clarke decided his health wasn't getting any better and he left the band. There was a lot of the boys left for work, as you can understand living away down here... moving on from....

The town band.

We were speaking about Tony getting a job in the school and how things evolved from the school.

Excellent.

Tony unfortunately died and I don't remember the year he died. That's terrible. I should have found out before I did this interview but after Tony died – he was in the school for one day a week and then the job was advertised and I actually went for the job. There was two or three of us in for it and George Sharp got the job. George was ex-Argylls so he obviously had his pipe major certificate so he got the job anyway.

So George did the job for two years and, again, it was still just one day a week and then George left the area for work and the job came up again so I went for it again and I got the job in 1998 and it was just one day a week.

Excellent.

So I went in and by the year 2000, a couple of years later, I had maybe eight or nine young pipers and I got in touch with a local drummer called Campbell Anderson and we managed to put a wee band together and the band, the Kintyre Schools Pipe Band was formed in the year 2000 and we competed for the first time in 2002 in the novice juvenile section so that was kind of like four years down the line.

By this time we had gathered up enough momentum and put enough pressure on the council to get me up to two days a week so I was now two days a week and we were then – obviously we kept on pushing and pushing and pushing the council as you've got to do and pushing for drumming, pushing for more hours for piping as we had this band.

The band was reasonably successful in 2002. We got placed at every major championship. The five major championships.

Good.

And then in 2003 we won the Worlds – the world championships in novice juvenile which really put the pressure on the council, I felt, as something that we could really....

Indeed.

And it was building momentum all the time so by this time, in 2004, we'd actually formed another school band so we now had a juvenile and a novice juvenile band and my hours were at best maybe up to two and a half days. It just kept going on and on and on. We kept working away with these two bands competing and it was just very much a community

spirit. All the parents were behind it and the Kintyre Juvenile Pipe Band Association was formed as a funding body for the school band so that they could then source funding outwith the school because it's very difficult to get grants for a school band, as you know.

The bands were successful and we're still competing today and I was made full-time piping instructor in 2007.

Excellent. That's almost five years now. That's good.

Aye, five years full-time and we also managed to secure a part-time drumming instructor, which is at the moment held by the guy who started it all off, Campbell Anderson, so it's all went pretty good.

In 2007, I'd just like to add that the band won the Worlds again in 2006 and we already had a juvenile band and a lot of the kids, I felt, were not ready for juvenile so we then formed a Grade 3A band so, believe it or not, we actually had three competing bands from one school.

So how many children were involved in that?

I would say roughly about a hundred and twenty kids would be involved. That's piping and drumming between the three bands.

And is that primary and secondary schools or just the secondary?

Both because the novice band would have had some primary school kids in it as well.

So therefore there was a continual renewal of new people coming into the school system.

All the time, aye. It was just a cycle from chanter to a beginners' band, beginners to novice and then novice to juvenile and that's how today we're still carrying on the same system but in 2008 we felt it was all getting a bit too much to be quite honest to run three competing bands. It was really getting really a lot so there was the formation of The Sound of Kintyre Pipe Band, which was formed in 2009. I'm not very good with all these dates but anyway, we're getting there.

The Sound of Kintyre Pipe Band was formed for one main reason and the reason was it was somewhere for the kids to go and play when they left the school.

Excellent. Good, yeah.

A lot of the pupils down here obviously move away to Glasgow or Edinburgh or Stirling for further education and we lose them and that's also a big benefit for the bands in that area because we've got loads of kids that come through the Kintyre school system now playing in bands in Glasgow and Edinburgh and Stirling.

So you've quite a growth industry here in piping.

It's a feeder system really, aye, but it's all good fun. It's a lot of work but we've got a really good team. A good team of instructors to help.

You must have great satisfaction in seeing the personal development of the pipers.

That's right, aye. It's great. I think the reason it is successful is because at every level they've got a goal to get to the next level. You know, you're going through the bands and I think that's important for them.

So how many hours a week do the children have piping instruction?

Well their school lesson they get in groups of maybe two or three for half an hour. Every week they'll get a lesson. At the moment I've got just over a hundred pupils that I teach. I teach in seven primary schools in South Kintyre and one secondary.

Now are these pupils self selecting? Do they wish to play the chanter themselves?

They do, aye. The way it's done is in P5 everyone, every pupil in P5 if they want to learn the chanter or the drums, the snare drum, they get the chance and if there's more than is required we do an assessment obviously because it's hard to teach too many so we do a wee five week assessment where the pupil would get a chanter, I'd teach them the scale and a few movements and just take it from there, see how they get on. A lot of them are self selective. They'll kind of decide for themselves this is not for me and others will want to do it so it's good because at the end of the day I'm only teaching pupils that really want to be there, especially when they get to the secondary school, you know. I've known them from the age of nine and I'm teaching them right through to the age of eighteen so you do get to

know them very well and it's good fun and it's great to see them develop and move on.

So obviously it's something the children aspire to is to be in a band and be playing along.

That's right. I'm a great believer that the band is the main driving force behind the whole thing. I don't think I would have as many kids if I hadn't got the band.

So is there a good social life for the children going into the band? Do they have lots of perks?

Yeah. We've been a lot of trips abroad. We've been to a lot of festivals in Brittany, in Belgium and Italy so we've been a lot of good wee trips. Obviously the ones who make it into the competing bands we try and get to the five major championships every year but this year we're going to Dumbarton for the Scottish in May, we're going to Annan in June for the British, the European Championships in Belfast and then the worlds in Glasgow and Cowal Games.

We're not doing any trips abroad this year. It's quite a responsibility as you can...

But that's a very full programme but so wonderful for the children to have all these opportunities to compete at those major events. So do any of your children compete individually?

Yeah. We're always encouraging them to get into the solos. As I said the Kintyre Piping Society they play a big part in this by having recitals during the winter where they take down the top players for the kids to go and listen to and we also encourage the kids to play at the recitals with the professional pipers.

And we do workshops. In the past we've had Willie MacCallum and John Wilson who are both originally from Campbeltown doing piobaireachd workshops at weekends. Between the bands and the society, the whole thing's very active and bouncing off each other.

Indeed, yes. And there's also incentive for younger children to join in whenever they can.

Yeah, we try and get them out there and get them playing.

So you're very positive about the future of piping obviously in this area.

Yeah. Very positive. It's a wee bit worrying with all the cutbacks right enough but so far the music instruction in Argyll and Bute has been left and hopefully, fingers crossed, it'll remain that way.

Excellent. And do you do any private tuition in the evenings and such like?

I do, aye. For a couple of years there it was quite difficult finding time to do it just because the bands – I mean we practice Tuesdays and Thursdays most weeks and at weekends the bands always away doing something. There's very rarely any weekend that we're not being asked to do things.

So is that included in your teaching time for school or is that extra?

No, that's all voluntary.

All voluntary, right.

All the band work is done voluntary and as I said we've got a great team of instructors, pipers and drummers who come along and give up their time for the kids and it's really important. It's great to have these people to do that.

Right. Now what about your own competing.

Well, as I said, I did the solos. My father was always very keen – he was a box player and he was quite keen for me to play the box, which I do, I still manage to get a wee tune out of my accordion but my dad was keen on me to do the box but when I took up the chanter I think he kind of seen that that was my forte so to speak. He always encouraged me – took me round all the games but when I started – obviously when you leave school you start work, you get girlfriends and different things happen and living away down here in Campbeltown it was quite – to do the solo scene would be quite a big commitment.

To be honest I used to get really quite nervous doing solos and I felt maybe it wasn't for me. I always enjoyed playing but I would say probably I'm more into the band scene. I enjoy the band.

You enjoy it much better than the solos.

Aye, I enjoy the band.

So do you do judging?

I have judged in the past a few small competitions. I'm very involved here in Campbeltown obviously so I don't really do much out with this area. I really just concentrate on what's going on in here. And even in Argyll, if there's competitions in Argyll I've been asked to judge in the past but I really, I'm not comfortable doing it because I would then be judging the kids that I'm teaching myself so I try and avoid that.

So you mentioned a strong traditional piping in Kintyre and Campbeltown itself. What notable pipers have come out of Campbeltown?

Well the two that I've mentioned are in my generation, Willie MacCallum and John Wilson – both gold medalists. Hugh MacCallum, also a gold medalist. I'm trying to think now – you've got me here. I probably am missing somebody out.

Well earlier you mentioned the young man who had a very prestigious event.

Lorne Cousin, aye, who played with Madonna and went on a world tour with Madonna. Lorne's a very good friend and he was taught by Tony Wilson. Tony did a lot for piping in Kintyre for my generation.

Yes, indeed. Indeed.

Aye, Lorne. He moved to America after his tour. I believe he comes back and competes now and again in the solo scene. I know he was playing last year at the World Championships with Strathclyde Police Band, he was guesting with them.

Indeed, uh huh. And in the spare time that you do have, do you have piping engagements for yourself to play in?

I do the odd wedding. You're always asked to do wee local things, weddings and funerals and concerts and different things, aye.

Right. No groups?

No, no groups. I'm just so involved with the school bands and it's just finding time to do things like that.

Your methods of teaching Iain, which ones do you employ when you have pipers?

Well when I start the kids off in school I've always used the College of Piping Tutor Book – the green book, Tutor One – and I start the kids off on the scale, exercises, Scots Wha Hae and go right through the book and then once they can get through that book I feel they'll be pretty competent wee players on the chanter and then I give them a couple of local tunes, just wee tunes like Loch Ruan and different wee things like some slow airs and then I try and get them on to the goose and then from the goose on to the pipes.

We're very fortunate. Between the Association and the Piping Society we actually have about thirty sets of pipes that are owned by the Society and the Association and these pipes were bought. I know we got a Lottery grant for about twenty sets.

Excellent.

But a lot of the sets have been given to the Society by people who have passed on and families give the pipes to the Society or the Association for the kids to use so we're really fortunate that we've got these pipes so all the kids coming through get a set of pipes, we say for a year but if they want to hang on to them for longer it's up to them before they buy a set of pipes and then they will move from there.

As soon as they're on the pipes and they can play a few tunes we put them into the wee band, the wee beginners band that we've got on a Monday afternoon that practices after school.

So eventually a lot of the children buy their own pipes.

Yes.

So that must be quite a big outgoing for those children.

Aye, you're talking six, seven hundred pounds for a basic set of pipes now.

And what about their uniforms for the band?

Well the uniforms are all supplied and owned by the Association. It is a school band and the school's very good to the band because we get the hall free and we get all the practice accommodation free. The pipes are owned by the kids or the Association and the uniforms are owned as well. We've got a lot of uniforms. We've gathered a lot over the years.

So you must do a lot of fundraising, do you?

We do, aye. We've got a good committee who work tirelessly away behind the scenes – voluntary as well. It's mostly obviously parents, you know. We have an annual concert ceildh. We're just after having it there just last month, in March. We did two concerts in the one day. We had an afternoon concert and then in the evening we did the same concert with a ceildh and with the bar open and we raised over five thousand profit so that kind of just gives you an idea of how much people are behind the band. It was two sell-out concerts.

So that is a big community effort.

Yeah.

Excellent. Your methods of teaching Iain, how do you do that? Is it by – do you use canntaireachd?

Aye, I always believe in singing the tunes to the pupils.

You do, right.

I'm always telling them if you can't sing the tune yourself you won't be able to play it without the music, you know. I make CDs for them – not of me singing right enough, I usually use the Deger pipes, you know, the electric chanter. I usually use that. I'm always telling them get listening to it. Just listen and listen and listen and to get the melodies of the tunes into your head. It's very important.

I was always taught if you can't sing a tune you won't be able to play it. If it's not in the head, it's not in the hands.

And that's how you learned yourself.

That's how I learned myself.

And you're transmitting it to the children.

Aye. You've got to get the memory working. It's a good discipline.

Right, yeah. Because pipers must have to remember a huge number of tunes.

Well that's right, aye. You've just got to. Especially when you're playing the piobaireachd, there's a lot of memory.

Right. And the children enjoy this obviously.

They do. I think they see it as a challenge. I always try and put it to get them to think on it as a challenge instead of a chore. Try and make it a challenge. Try and learn this tune for Tuesday night or try and get it off and see how you can do it and a lot of them rise to the challenge. Most of them do.

Excellent. And it probably is a great positive carry over to their work in school as well.

That's right. That's right. It's a good discipline. Even being in the band because you're expected – you've to be on time, you've to learn the tunes, you've to come with your pipes well maintained. We teach them how to take care of their pipes. It's a really good discipline. For life as well. You always say to them, look, you only get out what you put in. If you don't put anything in, you're not going to get anything back and it's just life. You've got to work hard.

Absolutely. And also their uniforms to keep them very smart and to appear – I always feel very proud of pipers when I see how smartly dressed they are.

Aye, we've got a nice kilt – the Blue Ramsay the school band wears. A wee story, going away back to 2002, the very first band that we ever had, it was decided that the kids would choose the tartan and it was in the White Hart Hotel in Campbeltown. There was about maybe eighteen of the band and we left them with this book of tartan. We left them for about half an hour and when we went back we said, right, have you chosen a tartan for the band and this wee boy says aye, we've chosen a tartan. Of course it was the Rangers tartan [laughter] so they're all Rangers daft down here in Campbeltown but anyway, we said to them, no, there's no way we can wear that tartan so they chose the nearest which was the Blue Ramsay so that's the history why the band chose – .

So that tartan will continue.

Aye, hopefully. As long as we can keep it all going.

And you have to wear that as well, do you?

Yes, aye. We all wear the same tartan.

That's wonderful. Now apart from piping, do you have other work to do?

Well I've still got the barber shop, my father's barber shop, that's been going since the sixties together with my nephew who's my partner now. We run the shop – well he's doing the running because I'm in the school full-time but I try and get in most Saturdays if I'm not away with the band or helping the kids in the solo piping scene.

Good.

Aye, it means a lot to me to keep that business going, you know.

Indeed. So this was wonderful when you were just on one or two days piping tuition in school.

It was and that kind of allowed me the time. Because I was self employed it allowed me the time to get out of the shop because I had employees at the time. I suppose if I hadn't had that, to survive in one day or two days a week I don't think I could have managed.

Indeed.

So it did really. It's just amazing how that all worked in for me, having the barber shop, getting out to do the schools and then eventually become the full-time job for me.

So as far as yourself and instructors go and also as far as keeping people in the bands, it's so very very important that there is work in the town for people.

Yeah. At the moment it's looking good in the town. We've got the wind towers, you know the wind turbines.

Right, yes.

Doing the towers for that. A couple of hotels have been done up, the Royal and the Ugadale at Machrihanish. There's a new golf course been developed down there. The Machrihanish Dunes that actually sponsor the new band, The Sound of Kintyre. The Dunes company have sponsored the new band. So, aye, work wise – the fishing has been getting depleted over the years but there's still half a dozen boats. The farming's big – big farming area.

So job wise, I'd like to see more for the young people because it is a shame. It's good for them to move away. My own two daughters have moved up to Glasgow and they love it. Whether they'll ever come back is – who knows where they'll end up but at least if they can leave with a good education and a good background – .

So obviously Campbeltown is a good place to live.

I would say so. A great place to bring up your children.

And especially if they like piping.

[Laughter] Exactly, aye.

Well, having adverts like playing with Madonna and playing with Paul McCartney it's excellent material for a CV for anyone, isn't it.

It certainly is, aye.

Well thank you very much Iain for being so generous with your time today. Many thanks.