



NOTING THE TRADITION

An Oral History Project from the National Piping Centre



Interviewee **Ian Duncan**

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Now I'll just introduce the recording. My name is Veronica Hartwich I'm a volunteer with the National Piping Centre's Noting the Tradition Project. On today, Tuesday 6th November 2012, I am speaking to Ian Duncan currently residing in Perthshire, is that correct?

Yes.

Piper with many years experience, a wide and varied experience. Hello Ian.

Hello Veronica, that's just about it, yes.

Yes. [Laughs] As I said earlier on the stories can be whatever you want to talk about in terms of piping and you. Perhaps if we could just start out with one of the things that interest me, is the fact that you come from a musical family, where your own father was a noted singer and what that meant for you to become involved in music and piping yourself?

Well, I was born in 1950. My lasting memories of my father was he was always singing everywhere. That was about it, you know, he wasn't performing, so on and so forth. But you'd always say that he was brought up in the Bothy area, in the Bothy tradition. He was brought up on a farm where he relates all these Bothy songs and everything he was brought up with as the pop music of today. Anyway when he was young he was taught to play the chanter. He never got on to bagpipes, there was no money to buy bagpipes and then he went off to the Second War and then he never played again until I was about eight, he decided... He went in to Aberdeen one day bought a practice chanter and then started teaching me, we shared the chanter as there was not enough money to buy two chanters. So he was responsible for teaching me the pipes for about a year and a half and then took me to the local pipe band Turriff and District, which was the main band in the area. It was only in a matter of weeks when Jimmy Robertson of Banff he was ex pipe major of

the Gordon Highlanders. He was responsible for teaching all the good pipers in that area that he thought were worth teaching. He took me under his wing for a couple of years, Jimmy Robertson of Banff. So I went to him for a couple of years until he died and then my father got me going again until the pipe major of the Turriff and District took me under his wing and started teaching me, because he was a competing piper.

What was his name?

Bill Hepburn, no less from a very famous piping family. Around about 1962, I was about twelve, our farm was rented and the rent was just... My father was trained as an electrician in the RAF during the war. We moved to Caithness then for a couple of years.

What Dounreay?

No. Hydro Electric Board. Aye, yes. We were up there for a couple of years. But I was still getting the odd lesson from... I was still playing for Turriff and District Pipe Band and still getting the odd lesson there...

Yes.

Yes.

A bit of travelling?

A bit of travelling but I competed with them. Yes. See when I joined Turriff Pipe Band I must have been... My first parade I must have been about ten years old or maybe less. It was a complete novelty. There was so few young kids playing pipes then, there were so few. It was a bit of a novelty, I remember that but it's changed days.

Yes, that's interesting but you were unusual in that you were so young and taking part in the...

It was so unusual that it made the front page of the papers. You know, a youngster because there were so few young people, there

were so few junior piping competitions as well, you know, at the time.

Is this... I have spoken to an older man who took part in piping competitions at the age of ten which would be pre war...

Yes.

Do you think that it just a war time that it...

The war time did something, aye.

Knocked a lot of these social activities out.

I think it did. Because a lot of the Highland games took a while to come back again. Anyway...

[Laughs]. So you went from there, as you were in the... You had taken it to the stage where many people would sort of say well this is a hobby but you seemed to have managed to actually carry on beyond and take it further than that. I know you studied, what was it, engineering?

Aye, aye. Electronic engineering. Then I did teacher training so I am a qualified maths/physics teacher. But I chose maths in the end and I ended up teaching maths for six years.

Yes.

I didn't have any intention of becoming a bagpipe teacher. I was teaching maths in Crieff and teaching pipes to the kids at lunchtime. And my headmaster at the time was John MacLean of Raasay and he said I've just seen a great job for you, he said in Dundee. I'd not get paid very much for that, I said. I'll look in to it, he said. He came back to me within half an hour and he said you'll get paid just the same as you are at the moment. [Laughs]. As a teacher...

Oh he put a bit of influence in would you say?

I think he might because he was quite high up in An Comunn John MacLean of Raasay, the Head Teacher at Crieff High School. He'd looked into it. I was lucky actually. I slipped through the net before they put a bar on it. I was paid as a teacher...

Yes.

Before they decided only instructors, I slipped through the net.

I see.

Because I was paid as a teacher before that was dealt with. Yes, so. But I applied and got the job. It was Jimmy MacIntosh that actually put in a good word for me. Jimmy MacIntosh was one of the top pipers at the time and he moved to Pittsburg and he was a local Dundee top piper and, he probably persuaded the board to employ me. He was from the Bob Brown school, so we were both from that sort of piping school.

Yes so you probably had quite a lot of interests in common.

The same, aye. But I think John MacLean had probably quite a big say as well. There were a fair amount of applicants at the time. [Laughs].

Umm. There probably was. So this what...?

This was...

Nineteen seventies?

This was seventy... I started teaching maths in seventy three and I got the Dundee Council job in seventy nine. It ultimately became Tayside region, so I was teaching outside Dundee. And then local government reorganization again...

Shrank it back again.

Dundee. Yes. But I had fair enjoyment down there, fair enjoyed it.

Were there a lot of pupils really keen?

Aye a certain... Any amount, at least.

Any...? Presumably some who have taken it on?

Very few get to the top level [laughs], very few. But one or two have done but the main thing is just that there's a colossal amount of interest in it. The biggest change that I have noticed is the change in attitude from the Heads of Music, who in the seventies were pretty suspicious of the pipes. They used to refer to it as 'well, we'll need to find you a room some where's away because of the noise...

[Laughs].

And we'd be away in the far end of the school and in one case I was in the shower room teaching, which would be a no, no, nowadays. [Laughs]. But it was... All the Heads of Music now are very, very pro traditional music, pipes everything else... Whereas for them it was classical, you know, blinkered.

Yes, it would have been. You were taught proper music.

[Laughs]. Yes, that's interesting...

Yes.

When the development... I presume that the pipes have come in to favour paralleled along with, you know, other playing traditional Scottish music than other types of music.

Yes. That's exactly right.

The pipes have some strength now in the educational world.

Yes. We're not regarded with suspicion anymore. [Laughs].

I suppose one of the problems, not just the rather obvious school emphasis on the classics in music, which knocked out all things like jazz as well...

Aye.

But the fact that the piping within Scotland, the teaching of piping was handled out with the educational system.

Yes.

There was a system already there through military through local bands, private tutors...

Yes, mostly local bands that were doing all the work and ex military teachers and very few bagpipe instructors in the schools, really. It was Iain MacFadyen was the first real, as far as I can remember, the first real major appointment in Plockton High School.

Yes. So this is Highland...

This was high profile figure going in to schools...

Taking a leap there?

Yes. Because he was Glasgow through and through, you know, with his obvious Highland connections.

Yes.

But this was a real high profile figure going in to schools. Yes. But it's all changed, it's all turned. We are not covering a hundred percent of the schools yet but we must be getting towards covering half the schools in Scotland now teaching piping.

Yes. I have a recollection that the secondary school that I attend, which was Perth Academy, that there were boys learning to play the pipes but they were members of the school cadets.

Exactly, yes.

And they were people who in fact did go on to then follow a military career. I suppose that was one option.

Yes, that was one option, aye. That's my children's school, Perth Academy. [Laughs].

Umm. [Laughs].

But they have a tutor now, a bagpipe tutor in the Perth Academy. So it's all changed. It will be the same at the Morrison's Academy and at all these, you know, cadet force. Yes.

Yes. Obviously for yourself getting in to what was probably quite an early formal appointment within Scotland. So that sort of your contribution just by applying for the job and being there.

Yes.

Is there anything else on the development of education in piping* that you feel you've played a good part of?

I'm one of the SQA examiners and there are several of us doing that. But we play a lot with other instruments now. We play a lot with the school bands and whatever because that's whatever... But...

So what we're looking at there actually is the... I'll move away from the pipes as associated solely with a particular type of musical presentation, which is the bands along with drummers and so on, along with Highland dancing. I know that the folk scene has had pipers usually playing the smallpipes and Lowland pipes. But, as I say, are we looking at pipes going in to other fields of music now?

Oh aye, definitely along with all the others. There is very little traditional music coming from some areas. You know, it's still very pro classical. Many of our instructors in schools, strings especially, they won't touch on traditional music at all. So we're left,

particularly in, even in my area, which has been strong strings wise, you know traditional music wise, we still have instructors there that will not touch on the traditional music. They won't even dabble with it. So we rely, in Dundee, we rely in groups like Tayside Fiddlers to take up the traditional music mantle and at least introduce them to traditional music in that respect. The same in Perthshire with the Celtic Big Band that was funded by the Gordon Duncan Trust. A lot of them never get any traditional music at school at all. They maybe do, for the Standard grade music, they'll do the Scottish section which is laid out for them but it doesn't really go in to it in very much depth, they don't get much chance to play the stuff, you know. But I'd like to see signs of moving a bit wider.

It's very difficult...

I know...

When you're a school pupil to challenge the need for... What you need to actually get through your exam and get that qualification. Is there any sort of push from pupils to say well we'd like to try that..?

Well, yeah. Other than the fact that they try it themselves, no. I know in my experience of instructors even now who don't go near traditional music, they've been trained just to... Classical music only. I keep hoping things will change. [Laughs].

[Laughs]. Yes.

It will, it will. [Laughs].

What type of music within in piping tradition is actually favoured by the schools or the educational system?

Has to be the family favourites. Nobody is interested in anything else, you know. We just forced in to playing all the usuals.

Yes. Well given that one of things as I said, I have no background knowledge of piping of any strengths but one of the

things I have become acutely aware of just talking to pipers is how much music is out there? How many tunes are out there?

Thousands and thousands and thousands. Yes. But it always has to be Amazing Grace and Highland Cathedral because these are all for the end of term, irrespective...

[Laughs].

Of how much you want to play other things. Yes. It would be easier.. You know, there's not much drumming tuition in schools and that would make life a bit easier. If we had drummers, there is so little drumming being taught in schools apart from the private schools.

Uhuh.

That would help. That would help. There is no money to appoint drumming teachers but they've been saying that for decades.

[Laughs].

Yes but I mean if you're looking at drumming teaching you could look at sort of very wide of range of types of music indeed. As well as the obvious gain of teaching people then to...

Well invariably I'm teaching in schools where there are no pipe band drummers. So the usual is get one of the kit drummers or some of them to play because there's just never enough drummers at school never enough in any of the schools.

Are there enough in the whole piping world at all for the band, because obviously they're needed?

No in my part of the world no. There's always been a dearth of drummers. Always, always been a dearth of drummers. It would just be wonderful to have a full time or two full time instructors but it's just not going to happen, especially now until things are a bit healthier.

Is there the likelihood of educational expansion at the moment – uh no?

There is one school in my area who have shown their own initiative in that two individuals got there a piper and a drummer, for a day and the children pay the going rate for instruction, you know in groups. So that's actually Auchterarder High School. The children just pay the going rate and it's not subsidized by the council at all.

But at least it's a door cracked open.

Yes, at least they have a drumming instructor there for a whole day. And the only way to make it financially viable is to have to go in groups but that's fine. That shows initiative.

Have you ever played drums yourself?

No. I am from an era that... Thankfully I missed the era where the teacher said no pipe bands but I am from the era where you didn't play two instruments. You stuck to one. My teacher would never allow me to play a second instrument but he was thankfully very pro pipe band. [Laughs].

[Laughs]. Yes, I'm just realizing that there is a conflict of interest within the teaching...

Many teachers in the fifties and sixties were so anti pipe band.

Why?

They just reckoned it would just ruin your fingers, ruin your musicality and ruin your... I suppose the pipe bands then were pretty rough and ready and you could pick up lots of bad habits and never get out of them. But now things have moved on. Teaching is so, so much better than everything else. No, I can assure you my teacher would never allow me to play a second instrument. [Laughs].

Did you have an inclination to do so at all?

No.

Never? You were content...

Content. My father played the melodeon and I would knock a tune out cause it was sitting there anyway and the jews harp...

Yes.

There were never any whistles around. I just regret to this day that I cannot play a Low D whistle or a whistle or a flute or whatever. But it's too late now.

Time for a retirement hobby? [Laughs].

Possibly. If you'll find a teacher. [Laughs].

[Laughs]. We could.

Well. That's true. Whereas so many of the kids now I encourage them to play another instruments.

I'm trying to learn a bit here myself, piping as a tradition has not linked strongly in with playing, pipers playing other musical instruments. And you have now, for example, the BA here which offers piping but they must introduce the students to a broader range of music and to the potential of playing other...

Exactly.

Although I don't believe all choose to but...

Well it's the same at school they must have two instruments whether it be for the Higher, Standard Grade or Advanced Higher, they must have two instruments. Although interestingly in the schools your two instruments cannot be bagpipes and whistle. Whereas here I think, I'm pretty sure it's allowed here. Because they're miles different they're not even similar. But in school bagpipes and whistle is not a combination that's allowed. [Laughs].

How odd. [Laughs]. So you could play bagpipes and a stringed instrument?

Yes.

You could play bagpipes and a woodwind, a clarinet etc?

You play flute but not whistle.

Not whistle?

No. That's just one of the quaint rules that has never been looked at but interesting, aye.

[Laughs]. Yes.

Definitely, definitely.

So whatever the thinking was at the time?

Oh aye, I think so, aye.

So through all your years of teaching, this is a bit of a cheek perhaps to ask without naming anyone in all seriousness, any sort curious tales from your piping teaching worth telling?

You need to edit that, I can't remember actually I'd need to be thinking about that one. [Laughs]. I probably need another glass of wine or something before that one. [Laughs]. You will be editing this?

Well it's not me. I just make sure the recording is created. That's James's job.

Yes, ahuh. If I think of any I'll say.

Have you then, as well as the school formal educational aspect, have you been involved with pipe bands yourself with the managing or teaching...

Well from the word go. Starting with the Turriff and District Pipe Band and then after living in Caithness for two years we moved to Pitlochry then, again it was Hydro Electric...

Yes, it would be.

And my parents have been in Pitlochry ever since. And I joined a local band there the Vale of Atholl, which was a town band just played up and down.

In Pitlochry?

Yes, aye. Playing competitions. An old band, 1908...

Yes, established.

But never competed. Then I went away to Aberdeen University teacher training and then I came back to Pitlochry to teach maths in the local school.

Did you keep your piping up while you were a student?

I did, yes. Because I was very lucky there because when I was at Aberdeen University also Jack Taylor and Bill Wotherspoon were there as subsequently they were Gold Medalists. We would all travel to Bob Brown for lessons. And a group would take a bus out and I suppose the main way of keeping up our pipes going there was we all joined the Officers' Training Corps... OTC...

That would give you the opportunities.

It gave us a chance to play somewhere because you couldn't play in the student hall of residence.

No, you wouldn't have got on very well.

I was lucky enough. They did have music rooms down below in the cafeteria bit.

Yes.

But the novelty was that we could play and listen to each other. There was a lot of playing to each other then.

I say, I attended the University of Aberdeen and I do remember pipers being around. I had a friend who played the pipes but he was never involved in anything formal. I presume that he had learned as a child and was... It all had gone to tuition...

Right.

And he did occasionally play. But when he had a good few pints in him. [Laughs].

We were all enthusiasts and we would bounced ideas off each other and played to each other. [Coughs]. I'm sorry.

Do you want to take a wee break and get a glass of water?

I think I'll be ok actually.

Are you sure?

It was just a chip.

[Laughs].

Bill Fraser who was the first pipe major at the university, Dr Bill Fraser. He was quite high, he had something to do with the Royal Scottish Pipers' Association, the Royal Scottish Pipers' Society. And then from second year onwards Willie Donaldson was the pipe major, who was really very, very encouraging. He would find all sorts of tunes that I had never heard of in my life. Willie, he was a cracking guy musically.

Yes, that's quite interesting isn't it? Someone who's got the interest in the music that the instrument can produce and not merely that it's tied to this ...

He had a huge commitment to tunes because he'd listened to the dance band programme the night before, can't remember what it was called but he'd come in with tunes that he would adapt them for the bagpipe. He'd come in with all these great wee tunes. I suppose I'd never really thought that tune doesn't fit the pipes, we'll just ignore that one. He was certainly instrumental in making me think that way.

Did that help you when you became a teacher?

It did. It certainly did. I would play a tune 'oh that doesn't fit in the pipes', I'd probably just ignore it then. [Laughs]. Whereas you can amend things, which was something my brother did all these days, you know.

Again, not being knowledgeable on piping, although I'd heard of your brother. What he stood for wouldn't mean a great deal to me but I do understand that he was highly innovative.

He certainly was, he kind of changed the instrument in many ways. Changed the repertoire in many ways. But he was quite late into composing. Gordon would have been in his twenties before he started. He was involved in groups and he decided he wanted to play the whistle and he wanted to play it properly. So he went to the west coast of Ireland and stayed there for a week.

Ah yes.

He stayed there for a week and learnt to play properly. And he was hearing all this, great new ideas and as you saw it tunes that would fit the pipes. And then, of course, that switched his brain in to gear and he started coming out with all these great tunes. But he was in his twenties which is quite late, you know, for composers really, quite late.

He didn't take that direction from an early age, as you say?

Not really. He was very much a traditional, marches, strathspeys and reels and piobaireachds then all being subjected to groups and that Irish thing and CD's, there was no CD's then, cassettes.

No.

It just really kick started him in to all sorts of possibilities.

Yes. So he's left a legacy of different thinking about pipe music.

Ahah. He just totally changed the repertoire really.

Does that influence the kind of material which is being taught in the schools? Has his work influenced that?

Yes.

In what way?

The young children all want to play these types of tunes long before they should be, you know. I hear them playing and they really shouldn't be playing all these until they can actually master them. The controlled music like six eights and you get the sound, you get the pipes controlled... You can't stop them they just want play that kind of fast and furious stuff.

And become trendy. [Laughs].

I was forever hauling them back in, you know, you're ready for that just calm down. Let's see if we can play a six eight properly first.

Yes, yes. It's interesting one. In a previous interview I was talking to piper Jim Butler who also has been involved in... He's an art teacher, as you're probably aware, and talking about this and the new styles of piping. I said what it reminded me of was in, I think it was in nineteen seventies, blues guitarists got very tempted by the desire to show off the speed in which they could

play, which is not, sadly, going to produce good affect. That style of music can go from very slow to fast but this became something that everybody wanted to do...

To do, aye. But Gordon could play all the classic tunes, marches, strathspeys and reels but when he played this... that style of music we were speaking about just now, there was always an element of control, you know...

Well, he knew what he was doing.

There was always an element of phrasing, an element of control. And you hear the young kids there just going hammer and tongs at it with no sense of musicality or phrasing or whatever, but kids are kids. As long as they've got guidance, they enjoyed it, so.

Yes. That helps. There's nothing worse than being playing a musical instrument and actually being bored by what you're being taught.

Exactly, yes. So anyway I enjoyed my teaching. I've really enjoyed my thirty three years in Dundee Council and the thing I miss the least, I must admit, I had my share of teaching beginners. [Laughs].

What's the trauchle of teaching beginners? [Laughs]. Tell a non piper. [Laughs].

It's just that I invariably know within a week if someone's going make it or not. But I'm never cruel enough to say... I always let them find out for themselves.

Yes.

You get the other ones of course obviously talented but don't do a stroke of work. That's frustrating. That's probably more frustrating.

Yes.

But I can... You just know you take nine beginners and within two months possibly only one will remain. And then you get another ten and that the way it goes in cycles. It's hard work. [Laughs] to learn a musical instrument, you know, it is hard work. You get the others that plod on and improve a little bit every week and they are trying and then suddenly they're a piper, you know. But might take... They're all different. It's hard. I've had enough teaching beginners.

Yes. So rather more pleasure gained from teaching someone who has reached a stage of skill and can take it on and is interested in doing so.

That's just what I'm doing now. I'm retired and I've just got one or two private pupils. Pick and choose.

Sort of tuition to keep people on their toes.

Yes, aye, aye.

What about the examining side. In some ways that in itself is quite a stressful thing.

It's stressful for the performer. But that's the way it is, part of the three elements. It's performance and it has to be examined externally. At least pipers are generally used to playing in front of somebody, you know, it's part of our tradition. They'll all have played in a chanter competition, they all have played in a novice piping, very few of them won't have. So in a way the pipers maybe have a head start on the other performers, you know. Your brass people they'll hardly have ever... They won't have played strings. There's maybe a music festival that some of them take part in but not all of them. They find it harder I think than pipers.

Yes, I think I would say that. I was given piano lessons as a child and I think my mother was swayed by the peripatetic teacher to put me through an elementary exam. And, of course, I was used to only playing at home, pianos you don't carry around...

Exactly. So the Associated Board exams.

Yes. And I found it was a very strange experience and fairly uncomfortable experience to be taken somewhere else...

Aye, to a stranger.

Uhum.

That's where they all have difficulty.

Yes.

I've seen them in tears. Not the pipers, doesn't happen often but...

If a pupil is involved in band playing for example from quite an early age, then you are not only used to performing with others but, of course, you're all listening... They'll all listening to each other. I suppose that helps too.

That's right. You're often performing in front of the rest because you were told blow up, you need to tune your drones and then you need to play something, so you play and before you know it you're playing in front of the rest as you get your drones tuned and whatever. Yes.

It's totally different nowadays. The respect. The great Highland bagpipe has. [Laughs].

Yes, the Great Highland Bagpipes. The one that's surely still got the big public image.

Yes.

What about the other types of pipe? The Lowland and small pipes.

Yes, there's been a complete revival there as well.

Are there many opportunities for playing those in the schools or is there not much drive?

Not really. A lot of the kids do play them if they can afford them, that's the problem. They are anything but cheap small pipes, to get a decent set. I have a set, I got a set in the early nineties but it was like being a beginner again, the bellows. I would have had to practice, it wasn't for me. I couldn't master the blowing and the bellows. I daresay if I'd persevered but there was too much else happening. Pipe bands and solo and so on and so forth. The kids, they just pick it up just like that, you know. I was too old I think, maybe. I've got time now though. [Laughs].

Are you still playing in a pipe band yourself?

Aye. I'm gone from Vale of Atholl, where we started at the bottom of Grade Four, we were actually last in Grade Four in the world, which I am really proud of. I took them in to Grade One within seven years and then we started winning in Grade One in the eighties and through the nineties. I retired from the Vale of Atholl in 2000. I was just washed out. In the three bands I had about a hundred and twenty people and a very young family and I just decided that's right. So one of the young guys took over and did a very good job. After a couple of years Roddy MacLeod convinced me I should come down here. So I played with Scottish Power for a wee while and then I got the call from Drambuie. I took the Drambuie band on for a couple of years and then Drambuie pulled the sponsorship, the company hit difficult times, very difficult times.

Did they?

Yes, aye. Then I had agreed two years stint with Lothian and Borders Police with my friend from the Army School of Piping. After two years I said, there you are Neil, Neil Hall, and I left the band to him. Now I'm back with the Vale of Atholl again on my door step.

[Laughs].

But it's very much in the background I'm just enjoying my playing again. Aye, very much in the background. Yes, enjoying it. I also have a fun band which is the Atholl Highlanders which is just a prestige band.

Yes.

The band is just for parades and it's a tourism thing really nowadays.

You've got to look good for that one.

Yes, aye. We don't practice very much but we sound good and get the odd good trip out of it. Perform at the castle once or twice a year. Then the tourists go crazy because it's very colourful band.

[Laughs].

It's good as well, it's a prestigious thing to be in historically and everything else. Yes. That's fun, a lot of fun.

Well that's good.

Yes.

As long as you get fun out of what you do.

Yes. A lot of fun and I enjoy it.

So where next? What about family? Are there younger members of your family coming up with an interest in piping or...?

My wife is the bass drummer in the Vale of Atholl, she's played bass drum in Grade One for years both in the Vale of Atholl, The Spirit of Scotland and Lothian Borders Police.

Right. [Laughs].

So my daughter likewise, she was in the same three bands, my oldest daughter Sian and eighteen year old twins they both play. My son's a

piper, my daughter a bass/ tenor drummer. So we all play. I have made it easy. I suppose I made it easy for them because whenever there was a piping event, a pipe band event, they were with us.

Yes. Just become accustomed to what is was all about.

It was just the norm. Yes.

Yes, that helps.

Ay, it does. My sister is a fiddler; she's been a fiddler all her days. Yes. My dad's brother was a fiddler, from a very famous fiddler up in Aberdeenshire, Jimmy Dickie*, he was taught by him, so there's that side of the family. So hopefully the children will carry on playing.

Yes.

I'm sure they will, yes.

You consider yourself Tayside, Perthshire strongly based but obviously the piping has taken you around a bit?

It certainly has. Next stop is Azerbaijan in two weeks. I think I've been everywhere really, pretty well. I haven't been to South America. South Africa Australia, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and then obviously the States and Canada and all over Europe but never been to Azerbaijan, that will be an interesting one.

Definitely different. Have they got pipe traditions there, have they of their own?

No, no. There's a Caledonian Society there...

It's a visiting... It's an exotic for them?

Yes, there's a lot of links between them and Aberdeen because of the oil there. Direct flights to Baku. My first time there. We often get asked to play at these things Caledonian Society balls round about St

Andrew's time. It was Bermuda this time last year that was okay, it was nice and warm for November [laughs]. That was interesting actually. A lot of Scots, what a lot of Scots around Bermuda.

Ah huh. [Laughs].

Mostly in the financial side of things.

Well we're supposed to be good at money [laughs].

Supposed to be, aye. That's... Why you all here? They said, we're all because of Gordon Brown when there was some sort of change in the tax laws. [Laughs]. The companies all moved to Bermuda they all blame or thank Gordon Brown possibly.

Might be the latter, yes. [Laughs]. You visit these other countries, what sort of responses from local people do you get, if you get a chance to actually meet and speak to them?

I usually get a chance to speak. If it's a Caledonian Society affair we'll probably just be stuck with that expats really. Whereas I've done a few tours of Japan and so on, and they're fascinated. More than often they just want to practice their English on you, speaking English.

Ay, yes. That matters a lot.

Yes, hundreds of cameras mind and whatever. But quite often I'm going out judging some of the other competitions in Vancouver and the east side of the States and Canada, so I'm with piping people. You know. I've done some teaching in bands in some quaint corners.

And the pipe band, you know, development seems to be good in the States. Is that fairly new? I mean I'd expect Canada to have been well established...

Canada. Aye, yes certainly. There must be, I don't know how many bands in the States now. Even New York alone just about every fire brigade has a band...

Oh. [Laughs]. Yes and the Irish dominance has pushed a lot of it aside.

Ay. They tend to play that type of tune and there's a lot of Hibernian societies. They all have bands. It's like I'm back in time hearing them... Again all these bands are improving. Every time you hear them they're better sound wise and playing wise. It's a global thing because you can see it, you can hear how they're supposed to sound so often. It's just taken off it's crazy, yes.

Do you feel good about that?

Yes, I do that's right.

Well I suppose to some extent what you done you've been aiming for once you took on the job as a piping specialist teacher.

Ay, I did. They were very few pipers in Dundee at the time when I took on the job. There was a lot of people learning chanter but hardly any playing pipes. The Boys' Brigade were big in Dundee.

Yes.

That was about it, you know.

As I say I was acquainted with people who played pipes in Dundee when I lived there, although I have to admit I never, just never asked how they came to be pipers. You know, it was something you accepted.

It was very big in Dundee. There was a lot of Boys' Brigade bands. Now there are only three in Dundee City.

But the piping is going out beyond all of that...

It's beyond the Boys' Brigade bands to civilian bands as well. As I said they were suspicious of me. The Boys' Brigade were not keen to

send their pipers to me in case they improved or whatever, whatever the reason was and then they'd move on to a better band.

Yes, yes that's right. If a pupil suddenly gets the hang of what things should be...

Should be...

They might start to become critical of...

They were very suspicious of sending their kids to me in the early days. So were the Army Cadets incidentally. But things have gone full circle now in that the structures at the Boys Brigade are all ex pupils of mine, so they're not suspicious any more. [Laughs].

[Laughs]. Good.

Hopefully I've made a big difference.

I take it with the forces army piping is still of considerable importance for the armed forces or are things changing?

It is but not so much, no. It's difficult because a piper is first and foremost a soldier, you see, unlike the military bands. So, so little of their time is piping. They'll be in Afghanistan like all the rest, so on and so forth.

Yes, but not as a piper marching in front as they were in the old days?

No, no. Not as the target. [Laughs].

No, no. [Laughs].

They still try to be there as a unit, you know, pipe band. But they are getting smaller and smaller all the military, all the pipe bands now. It's very hard to recruit, very rarely now does the British Army recruit a piper. They have to be taught from scratch from the age of sixteen and they have a ridiculously short time to train to be a piper.

They are at it twenty four all day and every day but it's a matter of months. You've got to go from scratch to piping and many of them don't make it but it's pretty intense because you can't recruit young boys in to the army any more.

No.

You know, that play pipes.

Yes, it's not an option. Again it's like someone else I interviewed, a much older man, who after he'd done his own military service during the war years, he'd been piping before, and he wanted to carry on. He joined the Territorial Army as a means of continuing to get piping training and piping involvement. He had opportunities at home as well. But he actually chose this as means of carrying on. As well, of course, as getting paid as a TA volunteer gets a... which is always handy.

Yes, that's possibly why I was in the OTC for over thirty years.
[Laughs].

[Laughs].

I was Pipe Major at the OTC in Dundee after ultimately. It was just fun. Yes.

So, you okay?

I don't know what else Veronica, I mean...

I'm sure there are plenty of stories but...

I'm hopeless.. Not off the top of my head. [Laughs].

[Laughs]. Keep going.

Yep.

Well, okay.

I think that's about as much Veronica. [Laughs].

Do you feel talked out?

Yes, I think so.

Well thank you very much.

A pleasure, aye, aye, thank you.