



## **NOTING THE TRADITION**

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



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**I'm with James Burnet, piper and stalwart of the Royal Scottish Pipers' Society in their elegant rooms which have a magnificent collection of piping photographs and perhaps, James, you could tell us how and when you became involved with playing the chanter as a little boy?**

I first started if I remember rightly towards the end of 1945. I was fourteen at the time and I was fifteen shortly afterwards.

**Who was your tutor?**

My first tutor was a master at the Edinburgh Academy called Robert McEwan who was also a member of the Society. He knew his limitations which were, not to put too fine a point on it, fairly extreme but I owe him a great debt. He was kindness and patience itself and he went out of his way to give me help as a comparatively late starter and after a month or two with him, he wrote to Willie Ross and suggested that I might benefit from going to him so I did.

**You would go up to the Castle then presumably?**

Yes, I would get on my bike, those were the days, and I managed to go all the way up to the Castle, getting off at Ramsay Gardens, which was a bit steep but in those days there weren't any trippers or very, very few. I left my bike outside the guardroom across the drawbridge and made my way up to the Army School of Piping which was then accommodated in the highest room in the Castle. It was right up at Crown Square, at the top of a staircase and it had three, if I recollect correctly, windows facing east down the Royal Mile towards Holyrood and two other windows facing north or northwest. It was the most wonderful view in the whole of Edinburgh and Willie Ross sat in one corner. It was a big room and Willie sat in a corner where there was a roaring fire and it was supplied with coal by sweating members of the Army class who were despatched to the bowels of the earth and where they would find fuel supplies. There he sat, dressed in plus fours, and there he taught me. I think when he had an Army

class, there was a big table down the middle of the room and they sat on each side of the table but you would need to ask someone who had been on the class.

### **He taught you in his spare time then?**

Yes, he had a number of private pupils. I don't know how many. Not a very large number but he was in charge of the Army class. He was employed partly by the Army and partly by the Piobaireachd Society. Quite what the financial arrangements were I don't know but with the job he had a very small flat also in the Castle which he occupied. I think by the time I knew him he was a widower but his daughter, Cecily, stayed with him plus a grandchild. He had a small number of pupils for whom he charged, looking back on it, a ridiculously small fee. When you think that chief among them at that time was John Burgess. John Burgess was at school with me at the Edinburgh Academy and he was two years younger than me. He started piping more or less at parturition, but he was wonderful because when they wouldn't let him play at school, he thought, with some justification I dare say, he played in the Academy Pipe Band as it then was, a very different animal I may say from the Academy Band nowadays. He reckoned it would ruin John's piping. He was a lovely man, John. In the fullness of time, when I was about seventeen, eighteen, I became Pipe Major of the School Band and John, by this time, had already won the Gold Medal at Inverness and little boys or even teenage boys being what they are, you'd have thought he might have been a bit sort of uppity and patronising towards the school pipers or towards the school band and me in particular but not a bit of it. He was modesty itself. He could not have behaved towards the other pipers in the school in a more gentlemanly fashion.

### **That's very interesting.**

Well, it's a funny reflection. There he was, he'd won the Gold Medal at Inverness and it was the custom of the Rector at school assembly in the morning if some pupil, or something of note had happened, he would announce it to the whole school but there was not a word about

John Burgess and that wasn't in any way malevolent or anything like that. It was just the position and I think that there were only two people in the school that knew that John had won it – one was himself and the other was me. The whole of music in the school, and in other comparable schools, occupied a very, very low place but the Academy now has two bands of about sixteen pipers in each, a junior and a senior, and lots of little boys coming on. In my day they were damn lucky to raise eight pipers and one or two coming on and the standard was, by comparison, very low but then in those days the amount of tuition we got at school from a very nice fellow called Allan Stark, I think he had been the Fusiliers' Pipe Major in the War, and he worked for J & R Glen in the Lawnmarket and subsequently he started up his own business as a maker; in fact the first pipes he made since going out on his own were a set of cocuswood pipes for myself which my son now has in Nairobi, beautiful drones, the chanter wasn't up to much but the drones were super. Pipe Major Stark had half an hour to instruct each week, half an hour with the band an hour altogether and half an hour in which he gave various individuals five minutes each and then there was a band practice lasting half an hour and that was all we got. I think in most other schools, it was much the same, and it was the same with other instruments, it wasn't anything against piping, it was just the position that music held in schools.

**I'm looking behind you and there's a picture of Willie Ross and Angus MacPherson.**

Judging?

**Yes.**

That was in 1960. It's a great pity, that photograph, really, because it shows Willie with the most enormous distended nose and it was a condition which I believe is sometimes referred to as "Tattie Nose" but nothing at all to do with alcohol. People used to say "Ah, that's Willie, he drank too much" and it was nothing of the kind. It's a well-known medical condition. I expect they can do something about it

nowadays but old General Richardson used to get very cross about that photograph. He was a medical man and he was most kind and encouraging but, you know, on reflection, when it came to piobaireachd, and this sounds like some fearful sort of iconoclasm. Subsequently we had lessons here in the Society's rooms, seven of us, from John MacLellan and John was a far better teacher for my money than Willie Ross. Willie Ross showed you what to do, explained how to do it but he never talked about a tune, he never considered the different ways that it could be played, about the phrasing and so on and so forth. There were two ways of playing it as far as his pupils were concerned – the right way and the wrong way. Of course, one didn't realise that at the time as a boy of fifteen or whatever I was when I started on piobaireachd, I just thought it was the most magical stuff but he was a wonderful teacher of light music, no doubt about that, and a wonderful teacher of ceòl mòr as well but I think looking back I wish he'd explained a bit more about the tunes that he taught me and given me a bit more insight into it rather than sort of "play it like this" but, undoubtedly, the highlight of my week was my lesson with Willie and I was absolutely distraught at the end of the term "God, another six weeks" or whatever before I go back to Willie. It really was the absolute highlight of my week.

### **Did you play to him on the pipes or was it the chanter?**

Never, just the practice chanter.

### **Did you hear him play?**

No, I never heard him play. He played on the practice chanter and when he was just sitting there, it was wonderful, I'll never, ever forget until the day I die Willie Ross playing that two part strathspey Balmoral Castle, on the practice chanter. It was just pure magic! I sat there and I couldn't move. It was wonderful. I've heard other people say that they reckoned the way he played Balmoral Castle was something else again and it certainly was, just that little two part tune, it was quite super.

**So, did you stop going to him when you left school then?**

I stopped going because His late Majesty, King George VI, required my presence in the Army.

**Oh, really, this was National Service?**

This was National Service, so I buzzed off into the soldiers as it were.

**Was there any piping involved in that?**

None whatever, I don't know why but I opted to join the Royal Artillery, I can't think why but I did and I ended up in Gibraltar where the scope for piping lessons was somewhat limited! Then after that I went to Cambridge and I had periodic lessons from old J B Robertson. He came up on a weekly basis to instruct the members of the Cambridge University Pipers' Society and he chiefly taught the beginners and others who weren't very experienced but I had one or two lessons from him, not piobaireachd, but I had light music lessons from him. He was a great player of marches, wonderful player and I got on very well with him. He was a character.

**Quite a character, yes, perhaps you could tell us a little bit about him then?**

Well, I say he was a character. Most of what I know about him I know from hearsay. I first got to know him because he used to come up to Cambridge to instruct and we had an annual competition and J B always appeared for that to sort of tune people's pipes. He didn't actually judge, or did he? I'm talking about sixty years ago so it's a bit hard to remember but he was always there and it was quite a thing the Cambridge University Piping Society. I was Pipe Major of it for a couple of years but the head of it, at Cambridge every Society had to have a senior member, a don, as President, I suppose to sort of keep us out of financial trouble, but our President was Campbell of Kilberry.

## **Archibald Campbell?**

No, James Campbell. He was a Fellow of Pembroke. He actually practised law in London but he came up at weekends and he was responsible for the organisation of the competition, I don't quite know why, but we always held it in the most beautiful garden in Cambridge. It was the private gardens of the Fellows of Clare College and it really was the most beautiful garden you could ever imagine. Why it was held there I don't know but it was lovely. JB Robertson was there and he was kind enough to say once or twice that he enjoyed my playing so that was very encouraging.

**Excellent. So James Campbell had a long association with Cambridge University. Did you know him quite well?**

He was a Fellow of Pembroke College and for many, many years I kept in sporadic touch with him and also, of course, I knew him through the Piobaireachd Society. I think he died in Cambridge but certainly when he retired as a Fellow he lived in Cambridge. He was a nice man.

**And a great authority on piobaireachd.**

Yes, he was. I knew his father, Archie Campbell. Well, I met him but really not much more than that. He was kind enough to second me for the Piobaireachd Society. Old JP Grant of Rothiemurchus proposed me and Kilberry seconded me.

**That's quite something [laughter]. So how did you become involved in this? Was it something you wanted to do?**

The Piobaireachd Society? I was talked into it by Rothiemurchus. It must have been about 1950, my first year in Cambridge, it would have been 1952. I remember the telephone rang and this mysterious man was on the other end of it. He told me that he was J P Grant and he wanted me to go and help him with judging at Nethybridge.

### **Had he heard you play or something like that?**

I think I had been put on to him by a chap called J Hector Ross who was Secretary of the Royal Scottish Pipers.

### **So you joined the Royal Scottish Pipers?**

I joined the Royal Scottish Pipers in 1949. I played a bit then and I think I played reasonably well I suppose when I left school. I think Rothiemurchus was not expecting me to be a great judge but he was very keen on young people being brought on and I am pretty sure that the reason why he got me to come along and judge was because he wanted a youngster to get experience on the condition that he would keep his eye on me and see that I did the right thing and indeed I learnt a great deal from sitting beside him. He was another man I liked very, very much.

### **Perhaps you could tell me a bit about him then?**

Well, I knew him quite well for a very short time. When I went away down to England and I lost contact with him. I went to England to teach at Bristol and that was in 1957/58. So I didn't know Rothiemurchus for a long time but I did know him quite well for a short time and in the middle 1950s I judged with him on quite a number of occasions. He obviously approved of what I did [laughter]. I went to quite a lot of the Speyside Games and I went to South Uist with him and I stayed with him in Corrour, his house near Aviemore where he was extraordinarily kind and we used to repair to his study after supper. We would chat away and then I would be obliged to get out my pipes and play two or three tunes to him and it was lovely.

### **He was obviously a great authority?**

He was a great authority but I never heard him play but if you look at the records of the Royal Scottish Pipers roundabout 1900 and before he went off to be Sheriff in Orkney, he played regularly and they had regular competitions, not just annually as we have now, and he was



always there and thereabouts on the list of competitors. He won a lot of competitions. What the opposition was like of course I don't know. He expressed a great interest in piping at a young age and he went to a Prep School called Cargilfield and he expressed an interest so a man was sent from the Castle. Those were the days! Some wretched piper was sent all the way to Cargilfield to give this whippersnapper lessons [laughter] and he produced a reed that was so strong the poor wee boy couldn't blow it so the piper departed and then Rothiemurchus went on to Winchester where he met a more senior boy who was already a piper and he was the chap who really got Rothiemurchus started.

### **Was he a well-known piper?**

I'm trying to remember his name. I don't think he was any great shakes. He was an enthusiastic chap and he put Rothiemurchus on to proper tuition. He went to Willie Ross amongst others and so he knew what he was doing. I suspect he wasn't any great performer but he knew exactly what he was talking about when it came to Piobaireachd.

### **Presumably you would have noticed that in your discussions and so on?**

Yes. He was very helpful. The chap said he was going to play such and such a tune and Rothiemurchus would say "well, you may play it this way" and "you may play it that way" this tune's got peculiarities and he would tell me all about them before he got started while he was still tuning up. He was very, very helpful indeed.

### **When you were going round the Games then do you recall some memorable performances? Who would have been competing around these years? Would it have been Bob Brown and Bob Nicol?**

Well, I mean, it sounds incredible but when I was judging in my early days I was judging people like Bobby Brown and Bobby Nicol and

wee Donald, all those people and great performances abounded. I think the competition I remember being most sort of carried away by was in South Uist. I went there a couple of times and we started off sort of fairly early in the morning, the next thing I knew we were being offered lunch. We stayed in South Uist and nowadays they go in an aeroplane from Glasgow and they come back the same day but going to South Uist in 1953 or whenever I did was quite a safari [laughter]. I went up by train the night before and stayed with Rothiemurchus and stayed at his house. Then he drove, he had a little Ford, Prefect I suppose it was, and this car knew the road between Aviemore and Mallaig so well that it didn't need any instruction [laughter] and he would gesticulate wildly while describing the tune. In those days the little road from Fort William to Mallaig was an unmade surface and single carriageway with passing places and from time to time we'd meet a MacBrayne's bus coming in the opposite direction. There was no question of Rothiemurchus reversing and finding a passing place, the driver of the bus would recognise the car and he would go pale [laughter] and get into reverse and go round corkscrew bends until he would find a passing place from which we would then drive through. He was king of all he surveyed in a way just doesn't happen now and eventually we would get to Mallaig, then we would get on board and from the moment we got on board I think the Captain of the boat sort of relinquished office and Rothiemurchus more or less took control of the boat.

### **Would all the pipers have been on it?**

All the pipers were on, yes, there they'd be and whether they liked it or not they were dragooned into playing and they had to stand there and Rothiemurchus sat there with me beside him and the other judge if he was coming on the same ferry and we'd be regaled. I remember one New Zealander declined to play, I thought quite reasonably, but Rothiemurchus was going "trumped up New Zealander" [laughter] he wasn't at all pleased. On one occasion we were going across and it was pretty rough. The boat was bouncing about like a pea on a drum and eventually even Rothiemurchus noticed. Normally, he just sat there in his raincoat and his hat, a cigarette in a long cigarette holder

but he decided that the weather was getting too much of a good thing but we didn't abandon it, not on your life! We went down into the bowels of the boat and I don't know if you've ever heard bagpipes played in a small boat, with iron sides and no sort of depth of sound of any form, it was unendurable and eventually even Rothiemurchus could take it no more. We went back onto the deck, I was feeling pretty green, but we were getting close to Lochboisdale so we stopped piping. We got into Lochboisdale but that was a memorable trip.

**So, would the greats of the day have been on that trip, I mean, presumably, whoever was doing the circuit at that time?**

Yes, it was part of the circuit but the greats of the day were there, oh yes.

**So who apart from the Browns and Nicols?**

Oh, what were the names now? I've forgotten. J B Robertson, he played once. I think he'd really stopped competing but I can't remember. You know, if you told me the names I would remember them.

**You obviously joined the Royal Scottish Pipers' Society when you were a very young man?**

I was eighteen, yes.

**Perhaps you could give me some reflections on what the Society was like back then?**

Well, we didn't occupy these spacious apartments that we have now. We occupied premises at York Place and they were rather good premises. It had a big sort of practice hall and we had a splendid man called Pipe Major Bryce who was our factotum and piping tutor, he tuned the pipes and he kept the hall. He had a very small flat alongside of this practice hall and he looked after us for many years. He was very highly regarded. I don't know what regiment he was

Pipe Major of but he treated everybody with a mixture of friendliness and courtesy and even a new young member like me he made me feel at home straightaway. We occupied those premises for a time and then the lease fell through and we went to another place in York Place for some years and I think the Society was at a very low ebb then. I had know the old York Place when I was at school. When I came out of the Army and I went to Cambridge, I think in my first Christmas vacation from Cambridge, I decided to make my appearance at the Pipers' Society and I was greeted in a very friendly fashion by everybody. Now, there were only eight people there and I was twenty-one and everybody else was forty plus or more and they hardly played at all. On one occasion I remember nobody had actually got their pipes out of the box and they just sort of drank jovially and chatted and then went home. I very nearly jacked it in, I very nearly resigned then because I thought this is not for me but, there it was, it recovered from that. I remember coming back, I went south in 1957/58.

### **This is when you went to teach in Clifton College?**

This is when I went down south to teach in Bristol and I came back to Scotland in 1973.

### **Was that to become Headmaster of Edinburgh Academy?**

That's when I became Headmaster of the Edinburgh Academy Preparatory School, yes, and I was astounded at the difference between the Society as I had remembered it and the Society in 1973.

### **Are you able to say why it had been brought up?**

I suppose a number of people who didn't go away as I did but were as fed up with it as I was him decided to do something about it. That's the only explanation I can give. I think too the premises that they occupied, the second set of premises, that lease expired, I don't know the details because I was not there, and it was decided that being peripatetic going from place to place was a great disadvantage and so

an effort was made to buy our own premises and the premises that we are in now came on the market and the whole Society of course was mailshotted to try and raise the money to buy it. Enough money was raised to buy it and I think people thought, well, now we've got our premises, let's make a go of it. I suspect that was the reason.

**Who were some of the figures that were keen members in those days?**

There were one or two very good players, Charlie MacTaggart, old Colin Caird, now he wasn't playing much; he was the chap who got me started on piping, Colin Caird.

**Did you hear him play?**

Well, no, his older son, young Colin Caird was my closest friend in school and young Colin Caird was a very good piper indeed, amateur piper, but he married a New Zealand girl, and that was the last I saw of him which was a pity but the doctor knew of my great desire, money was a bit tight actually as a boy and my mother declined to let me have piping lessons but when Dr Caird gave me an old chanter I was able to demonstrate that I could get lessons for nothing at the Academy [laughter] so I remember him with great affection. He was a great player. Duncan McColl was another great player. The standard of piping nowadays is very, very much higher than it was then.

**Was that overall, or in the Society generally?**

Well, it was overall but particularly in the Society. As you know yourself a substantial number of really very accomplished players could hold their own against many good professional players, they wouldn't have the repertoire that professionals have, but we have some players, yourself included, the very best.

**I remember you told me when Colin Caird played the piobaireachd, Willie Ross would sometimes ...**

I can't vouch for that but I was certainly told that when Colin Caird was going to be playing the piobaireachd, Willie would, I don't know if it happened regularly or just once or twice, but that's what I was told but I can't vouch for it. He had a younger brother called Francis who was also a piper and Francis was not the world's greatest piobaireachd player but he was a very, very accomplished light music player. Very good indeed I believe but these chaps they were very reluctant to perform. I never heard old Colin play.

**But they would turn up to the meetings nevertheless?**

They would turn up at the competitions and just listen but by the time I got going they'd stopped competing.

**I remember once you telling me that you were very friendly with George Stoddart. Is that correct?**

Yes, George Stoddart, when I came back from the south in 1973 I decided that I'd like to get the pipes going again and I met George up here in the Society's rooms and got chatting to him. He was very friendly and pleasant and I asked him if he would take me on and he said that he would. I had eleven years of George. He was a lovely man. He'd assisted Willie Ross for many years and George had really taught out at Dregohorn, and I think was a sort of sidekick to Willie Ross. I mean his son Gavin, he was actually a better player than George ever was but George had a great knowledge and he was one of the kindest men I ever met. I never heard him say a harsh word about anyone and in the piping world that's fairly rare. I got a lot of piobaireachd from him. He lived in the flat at Comely Bank Avenue and he was extremely long suffering and kind to me.

**He sounds as if he had a friendly approach to teaching?**

Yes, he did. He was very encouraging and kind and made it a pleasure to go along for lessons. I remember once when a member of the Society went along for lessons, he was one of our members, some

say he was a man who did for piping what Jack the Ripper did for door to door salesmen, he used to go to George for lessons and I went along for my lesson one day and George said “Oh, James I’ve just had Maxwell for an hour, man, it was vile!”. That’s the harshest thing I’ve ever heard George say [laughter] but he was a Senior Pipe Major in the British Army for a time and he was the first solo piper. He was very proud of that, he was the first solo piper at the end of the Tattoo, a function he filled for some time.

**Did he come up to the Society’s rooms on occasion then?**

Oh yes, he used to come as a guest quite frequently. He was very well liked. He and Margaret, his wife, she used to come up too.

**Having had a break from piping while you were in Bristol, you obviously became extremely keen again and without blowing your own trumpet you won lots of prizes here, haven’t you?**

I won a number, yes.

**Would it be alright if we just took a little wander round the room just to see if there’s any sort of great characters?**

I don’t actually know them all.

**Perhaps we should just find the ones that you know. I am sure you didn’t meet Calum Piobaire.**

No, but I remember being at a dinner party with old General Christison. Christison was I think in his late nineties when he announced that he had had lessons from Calum Piobaire but I worked it out that actually Philip was four when Calum Piobaire died [laughter].

**These pictures are all probably a bit old aren’t they?**

James C Campbell, he was piper to Queen Victoria. Now, we've all been lamenting the way banks have changed. You no longer have a bank manager, you've just got things that go crash, like what happened to RBS, but when I left Cambridge I went to work first in the City of London and I had an account in Edinburgh with what we called the Commercial Bank and they had a branch at the City so I went and opened an account there. I went in one day to get five shillings or whatever I could afford and they said "Ah Mr Burnet, as a new customer the manager would very much like to meet you if you could spare the time". So I went in to the manager's office where I was very politely greeted and he said "I'd just like to go through your account with you and see what we can do" and then he said "Ah, I see you're a member of the Royal Scottish Pipers' Society" and I said "yes". He said "my grandfather was piper to Queen Victoria and we have his pipes at home, would you like to see them?" I said "I'd love to" and he said "Well, I'll bring them into the office and next time you're in tell the teller and I'll show them to you" so there we are.

**That's extraordinary.**

A magnificent set of silver mounted pipes. You don't get bank managers doing that these days.

**No, you don't. You get a call centre and that's it. There are some more pictures here, the MacPhersons, Angus and Malcolm.**

Yes, these are all before my time. I mentioned earlier about ??? a fine looking man he was.

**I remember there was a thing in the Piping Times, I think you must have written a letter but there was a dinner for Willie Ross.**

That's right. We were actually trying to persuade Willie to retire but Willie didn't take the hint. We had it in the Assembly Rooms here, it must have been about 1952, I was still at Cambridge I think and I was about the youngest person there. John Burgess was there and young Colin Caird. We were the three youngest there.



### **Was John Burgess playing at it?**

Yes, there was a group of them played, four or five of them headed I think by Donald Macleod and they played round the table and then Donald played a piobaireachd which had been composed for the occasion.

That's George Stoddart's father in law, James Sutherland, Margaret Stoddart's father. I met him I suppose once or twice but I didn't really know him.

**That's Bob Nicol, yes, is that him playing at a funeral, no, I don't know.**

That's probably Nicol playing at Bobby Brown's funeral or was it the other way round?

### **Was it not John MacDonald's funeral there?**

Oh yes, it might have been John MacDonald's funeral there, that's right, that's who it was.

Now there's George Stoddart, and John Burgess and some of these people I met. Willie Connell, big Donald MacLean, that's him there, George Stoddart and R Henderson.

There's Robert Brown leading John MacDonald's funeral procession and that's at the grave, yes, that's right.

### **Did you know the Balmoral, the Bobs of Balmoral?**

Only because I judged them [laughter] and being the sort of people they were they treated me with the greatest possible courtesy. They were probably saying "who's this whippersnapper?" but they never showed it, they were as delightful as they could be.

That's my old chum, Rothiemurchus. He was a remarkable man, never without a cigarette. He was the chap who first deciphered canntaireachd. He was given the sheets of what looked like gibberish by a chap called Bartholemew and he looked at these tunes and he couldn't make head or tail of them and then he said we'll have a look at the titles and he tried to relate what he read in canntaireachd to the staff notation and I think A Kiss of the King's Hand was one of the first that he managed to decode. It was a remarkable intellectual feat actually. He was the Sheriff first of all in Inverness; he succeeded his father as the Sheriff of Inverness, the first ever to do that. But, you know, throughout his career, not one single appeal from his judgement was successful and he was brought up more or less bilingual with Gaelic and if he got an old defendant who wasn't very comfortable in English, he would have the proceedings conducted in Gaelic. He was a wonderful man in his own way. I suppose nowadays you would say he was arrogant but it was just the way things were if you were the fifteenth laird of Grantown and you and your family had owned all that stuff over the last five hundred years then you just took it for granted. You wouldn't think it was arrogance; it was just the way things were. It's not like that now but that's how it was. He never wore a wig because it was stolen by an American tourist he said.

**Is that right?** [laughter]

But he wore a kilt and he wore his gown over his kilt. I never saw him wearing breeks.

That's a nice picture. That tall man is Donald MacGillivray. He died just a year or two ago. He was a delightful man. He was a big cattle farmer, rancher and his son is doing very well, Duncan, nice chap.

Who have we got there now? Hugh MacRae, don't know who these people are. Late 1970s is certainly not right.

**Do you think it is earlier than that?**

Yes, because I would have been there. That's Iain MacLaren.

**Oh yes, Iain MacLaren, I still see him here.**

Yes, I think he's the oldest surviving member.

**Some tunes written by ...**

That's Andrew Wright and a rather unfortunate picture of James Campbell.

**Yes, looks very distinguished.**

Yes, there's some nasty smell under his nose there [laughter]. He was a delightful man. You couldn't get a better photograph of Rothiemurchus than that. He had this dreadful shabby old raincoat which he never took off as far as I could work out except when he went into the house and he always had a plaid over his shoulder but that's him absolutely to life. That's Kilberry there.

**Oh yes, so there was Lieutenant Colonel John Campbell of Kilberry.**

That was Kilberry's brother, Archie's brother, and he was instrumental as a founding member of the Piobaireachd Society.

**These are some of the prizewinners – Alasdair Ross, Andrew Frater, John Perceval, who was he?**

John Perceval was our tutor. He was a policeman and he had been in the Police band. He was a superb tutor, great chap. He got the Quartet going, the Society's Quartet. It began when I was Pipe Corporal and Sheriff Bell, Stuart Bell, was the Pipe Major. That was about 1975/76 and we were entertaining the Glasgow Highland Club and Stuart Bell asked me to get a few people together and rehearse a few tunes so that we could put on a bit of a show for the Glasgow Highland Club so I did and that was the beginning of the Quartet

which has gone from strength to strength and now plays at Holyrood and all sorts of places. Really, the Quartet consists of a few people but it all started up from Stuart Bell.

### **There are lots of Fraters there.**

There were a great clan of Fraters, the doctor, he was a GP in Dunfermline who was a very good player indeed and there were two sons, both of course excellent players.

### **There's Nigel Malcolm Smith. Here are some of the judges at the competition.**

There's Andrew Pitkeathly, he was a nice man. He never got a chance to compete the way he should have. He was Pipe Major of the Argylls and during the summer he had awfully bad luck, they were posted abroad, but I remember very clearly judging Andrew at somewhere like Dulnain Bridge, some little Games, with Rothiemurchus and he was at the time a Lance Corporal and Rothiemurchus turned to me and he said "that young man will end up in charge of the Castle one day" and, by God, he did. He was a very good player indeed but he never got the chance to win the medals that he might have done.

### **He did win the Gold Medal though.**

Oh yes, but he could have won much more but for the exigencies of military service.

### **Here's Duncan Cameron, Pipe Major.**

Duncan Cameron, another nice, nice man.

### **Pipe Major Evan MacRae.**

I think I am right in saying he used to make instruments as well. He used to make violins and things. I remember once he was playing at

Glenfiddich and you know how people tune, and they tune, and they tune, they drive most people insane and I remember Evan got on to the boards at the Castle, started his pipes off and that was it, perfectly in tune throughout, and I'm prepared to bet that most of these people who spent five or ten minutes tuning up could do exactly the same.

**There's the recently deceased Donald MacPherson.**

Yes, Donald MacPherson, and Donald MacLeod, Jimmy MacGregor in the middle and that's Douglas Ramsay. Sir Douglas Ramsay of Bamff. It's a big portrait and I don't know why he gave it to us unless no-one else wanted it. [laughter]. I first met him in 1946 and I was playing in the internal competition at the Edinburgh Academy and he was the judge. I always remember, it was the first competition I'd ever played in, I'd only been playing the pipes three or four months and a gust of wind wrapped my plaid round my chanter and my hands and I thought the least he might have done was let me start again.

**He didn't?**

No, he was a nice chap. He was a very bigwig in the piping world in those days.

**Was he the Factor at Balmoral?**

That's right, he was the Factor at Balmoral and he factored at Balmoral and he had another large house in Ann Street and in Bamff, it was a super sort of Victorian baronial house in Angus, a sort of ancestral home but he judged the school's competition at the Academy for some years.

**Was he an old boy then?**

No, he wasn't, but he was a friend of my chap, McEwan, who ran the band and he was succeeded by a nice chap called Archie Gill.

**At Balmoral?**

No as a judge, I meant. There's George Stoddart, D R MacLennan.

**Did you know him quite well?**

Oh yes. He was another character, and David Aitken. He was a super guy. David Aitken worked for a time in J & R Glen in the Lawnmarket, and his wife, Gemma, she was, I think, a sister of the man Ross who ran it.

I've got DR's miniature pipes. I don't know play them now because I've got my electronic ones but they were made by David Glen, they're a very nice set. They're a full size David Glen set as well and really you can see that they're made by the same man.

**What other pipes do you have, you've got lovely silver ones?**

Yes, Hendersons.

**We've got pictures of the Centenary Broadcast.**

It was taken in the year that we actually went along to the Broadcasting Studios in Queen Street.

**Did you play as a band?**

Yes, we played as a band for just ten minutes or so.

**There are a lot of well-known figures.**

There's some ken speckle figures there. Jimmy Campbell, he was a doctor, nice man, there's Frater and there's John Perceval. Niall Mulvie at the end there.

**I'm looking there at General Richardson. You must have known him quite well?**

Yes, you see there in the middle, Dunvegan in 1980, General Richardson, Dr J C Caird and Charlie MacTaggart, my God, what a trio. They were lovely men and the stories about Frank Richardson!

**Really, are you able to tell us any?**

Yes, and Colin Caird was such a nice gentleman and Charlie MacTaggart. He was the best light music player of the lot. He was a very good light music player. He produced some very good 2/4 Marches, The Piper's Farewell to Perth which is in one of Willie Ross's books. He worked for Grouse Whisky. Oh, yes, there's Frank Richardson.

**He was a great author and things, wasn't he?**

He wrote various books. One was all about homosexuality and generals [laughter] and called it Mars without Venus. I remember once I was one of the judges at the old Edinburgh Police competition; that was a very good competition and a great pity it died, and the judges were entertained in a place called the Albyn Rooms which used to be in Queen Street and we'd be very kindly entertained to lunch as were various other people upstairs in this dining room. There were three or four tables with six people or so. Sometimes, a complete silence falls when you've got various tables and by sheer chance into this silence came Frank's voice "Of course there are very few people who realise that Napoleon was a raging homosexual" [laughter]. In those days it wasn't the thing to mention when there were various ladies present. I mean lots of people have heard nice stories about him.

In this very room that we're standing in now I was going to play, I was competing and Frank was sitting at the back. It was announced that Mr Burnett was going to play "The Lament for the Children" and over my shoulder I heard "Will he by God, is he up to it?" [laughter].

I was in Leith Town Hall and there was a competition come recital and I had to sit beside Frank. Along came the judges including DR

who was looking very smart in a new jacket and his kilt. Frank seized my arm and in a voice that brought plaster down from the ceiling “God, there’s optimism for you, 81 next birthday, and he’s got a new jacket” [laughter] and DR had great hearing and he must have heard.

I once went to a funeral and as the departed was laid in the ground he turned to me and said “I sometimes wonder if it’s worth going home from these things” [laughter].

**Here’s a picture of Archie Kenneth and you knew him.**

Yes, very slightly, I didn’t really know him at all well but he was very likeable too. He, of course, edited the last few books of the Piobaireachd Society and he got rid of silly things like bar lines.

**What about your own involvement in the Piobaireachd Society?  
You were on the Committee for a time.**

I was on the Committee and then I was Secretary of the Music Committee for a time and I was Vice-President for a good many years all of which I thought to be a great honour but I decided when I reached seventy that it was time for younger people.

**Do you still go along?**

Oh, I still go along to the Piobaireachd Society. I enjoy the Piobaireachd Society conference and so on but you know the old buffers could go on too long and I thought well, seventy, I’d been more or less active in the Society for ten years and it was time to let someone else have a go.

**Here are some more pictures.**

That’s a nice one. Seton Gordon. People who didn’t like him called him Satan Gordon [laughter].

**He was a well-known person, wasn’t he?**



Oh yes, he was a naturalist writer. I didn't actually meet him, I never came across him, no.

### **There's George Lumsden.**

Yes, George, Lumsden, he was tutor and, of course, he's still with us happily. He retired from being tutor some time ago. I don't think he enjoys very good health. There's Walter Drysdale, he was an honorary member, he was a very good friend of the Society.

This is the handing over of an illuminated address, the photograph of which was there on the wall, and was presented by the competing pipers and others to Thomason when he produced the book *Ceòl Mòr*, and we felt quite properly that it should be in the National Library so a group of us, Brian Mackenzie there, he was the man who was really responsible, he did a great deal of research into the life of Thomason, a great deal, and he got in touch with Thomason's descendants and they not only produced this book which is followed by a hundred and ten signatures or something, all on the back of the photograph we have of it there, and it was an option to the Royal Scottish Pipers' Society but it attracted, because piping was largely in the hands of the military in those days, a lot of military men in it and it had a very stormy start. A lot of the competing pipers were not at all pleased when they found they had to learn new tunes. A lot of them couldn't read music and they had incredible memories but they had a repertoire of a dozen tunes or so and what with one thing or another the Society got off to a fairly stormy start but then it really got going. But Brian Mackenzie got that book and he also got the pipes.

### **Yes, they're amazing aren't they?**

He was in the Indian Army. They were Bengal Engineers and he was on leave in Sri Lanka, Ceylon as it was then, he was in pottering around in Columbo Harbour and he spotted a pile of ebony so he bought some and he took it wherever he went. He was responsible for

the railways in Bengal and he travelled a great deal and to keep himself company he bought a lathe and he made those pipes.

### **They're amazing.**

They're quite astonishing. The chanter he didn't make. The chanter is actually I think I'm right in saying it is Robertson, I have a notion. You see it's got this extraordinary key on it and there's a lovely little story about that because somehow that chanter got separated from the pipes and it fetched up in J & R Glen at the Lawnmarket. That was an absolute treasure trove, it really was, it had some incredible stuff. When J & R Glen went out of business, the whole lot was snapped up by the Museum of Scotland and the pipes and other instruments, many of them ended up on display in the Reed Music School, including that chanter but the label attached to that chanter was pure fantasy. They couldn't understand what the key was for and there was some rubbish about trying to make it into a shawm or something like that and in fact it's so that bottom Gs were played with the pinkie of the left hand because he had got what is called Dupuytren's Contracture known as the piper's curse where his finger curled up and he couldn't play the bottom G with his right hand but he had learned the flute as a boy so he knew all about keys and he had the key fitted so that he could play the bottom G with the pinkie of his left hand. I shudder to think what it sounded like but there you are, that is why it's there.

### **Is that how they recognised it as being his then?**

Well, yes, I got involved in that up to a point. I had some fairly stiff correspondence with the Director of the Museum of Scotland saying that it seemed to be a very great pity that two parts of the same instrument should be lodged a mile apart and would he like to let us have this and I said particularly in view of the fact that it exhibited a label which is pure imagination. I got a very sniffy letter back and he wouldn't part with it but then mercifully he got the bum's rush or he retired and his successor was much more amenable. I wrote to him,

gave him a year to settle in, and I wrote to him and he produced it. It's on loan, it's not ours.

**Did J & R Glen know that this was General Thomason's chanter then?**

I don't know if they did. He'd have probably handed it in or had something done about it, perhaps a new sole or something like that but how it got into J & R Glen's possession I don't know but we did know from Thomason's own writing that he had put in the key. There is the old boy.

**Yes, a distinguished looking chap.**

There's James Campbell but that's a recent acquisition.

**Finally, in your years on the bench, can you think of some outstanding performances or some professional performances that particularly caught your ears?**

There are so many. I should have been thinking about this. I might have anticipated this. I can think of one or two absolutely magical performances. The two march performances I remember most are Hugh Kennedy played at Inverness, Alasdair Gillies, and that was just electrifying. I think another absolutely supreme performance was by John Burgess when he played Lord Alexander Kennedy, it was originally called Lord Alexander Kennedy's Farewell to the Garden of Gethsemane.

**Why was it called that?**

You may well ask. Because the Black Watch were stationed in Malta and Lord Alexander Kennedy went on leave and he went to the Holy Land and while he was away his Company Piper Honeyman composed that tune and when he got back he presented to Lord Alexander who felt that perhaps it was a little bit close to the wind to link him to another well known fugitive in the Garden of Gethsemane,

so it was originally shortened to Lord Alexander Kennedy's Farewell to the Holy Land I think and eventually it was just shortened to Lord Alexander Kennedy. That performance by John Burgess, that was supreme. I think the other performance I can remember was again at Inverness, again John Burgess, and it was a performance of Ronald Macdonald of Morar.

**Oh yes, this is a famous one.**

That was something else again, it really was. So there we are.

That's old J P Grant with a sporran face. He grew a beard and was known as sporran face.

**He doesn't have a beard in that one.**

There's Gavin Stoddart. I think the best bagpipe I can remember.

**Well, that's perhaps a particularly memorable bagpipe that one.**

I particularly remember Gavin Stoddart, there was a sort of tribute to Seumas McNeill after he died at the Piobaireachd Society conference and Gavin played. His bagpipe was just superb. I mean I must have heard others as good but they were superb.

**You remember that, yes, it's funny how it sticks in your mind.**

Yes, there's no rhyme or reason to it. Now, that's a pretty memorable photograph, isn't it?

**Yes, that's a famous one, isn't it? Gold Medallists in the Queen's Own Highlanders, a very strong piping regiment, there's John MacLellan and you said that he gave seminars?**

He did, he came here and gave seminars, and really very good they were. We started giving recitals in 1977 and that was the first one that we gave, that we organised and it was held in the Assembly

Rooms in Edinburgh and as you can see it was Wee Donald and John Burgess. We had to recycle tickets, we'd had so many printed and the crowd kept coming, a lot of them were visitors. We've never had anything like it since but we hadn't enough tickets to go round so we had to sell them again and John Burgess played the Ballachulish Walkabout. It was an absolutely stunning performance. That was the last thing at the end of the recital.

That was the first of the recitals that he gave and we organised a succession of them. That was one there. There's Gordon Mooney, Robert Wallace, Roderick MacLeod and Hamish Moore, and Willie MacCallum

**That's Gary West, yes. I'm not sure who the other chap is.**

Gordon Walker.

**Well, it's a lovely room, isn't it?**

Well, it's got quite a lot of piping history, quite a lot.

**Look, James, it has been most entertaining for me, anyway.  
Thank you very much indeed. Thank you for your time.**

It's a pleasure.

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