



NOTING THE TRADITION

An Oral History Project from the National Piping Centre



Supported by
The National Lottery[®]
through the Heritage Lottery Fund



Interviewee **James MacIntosh**
Interviewer **James Beaton**
Date of Interview **15th February 2013**

This interview is copyright of the National Piping Centre

Please refer to the Noting the Tradition Project Manager at the National Piping Centre, prior to any broadcast of or publication from this document.

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

This is James Beaton from Noting the Tradition, the Oral History Project for the National Piping Centre and I am pleased to be in Newark, New Jersey, today with Jimmy MacIntosh, piper, piping teacher and an individual who has been very much involved in the development of piping in the United States over the past thirty years. Jimmy, welcome, and thank you very much for agreeing to speak to us.

Thank you very much to you James for taking the time to sit here and interrogate me.

Well, I hope it will not be an interrogation [laughter] but more of a wee chat. Really, I'd quite like to start right at the beginning and go back to your early days in piping. Where were your family's origins? Where did you grow up?

I was born in Broughty Ferry in 1925; it was a family of five children. Broughty Ferry was a fishing village. There was an Ex-Servicemen's Home in Broughty Ferry, Rosendale, and I guess my father bumped into this gentleman, maybe in the bar or wherever, and he just informed me this day that there was a man coming that night to teach me to play the bagpipes.

Oh, right, so you had never expressed an interest.

No, I hadn't. I never knew anything about bagpipes.

So these would all be First World War soldiers presumably that would be in the Home?

Yes, he was a gentleman that lived in Edinburgh, Tom Sutherland, he'd been a Pipe Major in I think the Royal Scots Fusiliers. He started me and then I joined the local band.

Which band was that?

The Broughty Ferry Pipe Band. Then in 1939, Willie Ross, Pipe Major William Ross at Edinburgh Castle, he came to Dundee for a month. At that particular period in time the Piobaireachd Society asked teachers to go and teach and John Macdonald went to South Uist so Willie Ross came to Dundee and my father had paid to get lessons for a month from Willie Ross. That was it then.

How did you find Willie Ross? Was he an inspiring teacher, was he quite a hard disciplinarian?

I never really understood that much about him at that time, I was only fourteen, and I can recall the tunes he taught me but at that time I wasn't an experienced player or anything.

No, what was he teaching you?

He taught me the 71st Highlanders and the strathspey and reel, Miss Ada Crawford and Colonel somebody of Garth or something.

Oh right, Colonel Stewart of Garth.

Aye. I got those tunes from him. I can't remember the rest of them and then in October 1939 my father just announced to me this day "We're going up to Dundee" that was five miles away and it was such a long distance then.

Aye, it would be then and of course Broughty Ferry would be a very separate village at that point.

It was, yes, and he just announced to me we were going up to Dundee and he took me up there where the place was mobbed with people being called up for the forces and he enlisted me in the Cameron Highlanders.

My goodness!

I was fourteen years and four months, four foot ten, and the next day I was put on a train at Perth with a pipe case and a suitcase for Inverness. That was me; he joined me in the Camerons.

Was that as a boy soldier or piper?

A boy piper.

Did you take to the Army life?

You had to...[laughter] No, I didn't, oh, it was bad, because the people that were in the forces at that time, boys especially, they either had the option of going to borstal or go in the Army, and it wasn't very pleasant. There was boys on there for... But piping wise it was probably a great thing for me because the Pipe Major was Willie Young. He was a student of Bob Meldrum's.

Oh right, my goodness, yes that's going away back to the 19th century.

His picture was actually in the cigarette packets. Then, in the Band at that time, the Lance Corporal was Willie McCrostie who was the reed maker; John MacLellan was the Lance Corporal, Captain John MacLellan, Mickey MacKay, Evan MacRae, Angus MacDonald who was a Pipe Major at Glasgow Police, Hugh Fraser and Malcolm Macpherson. They were pipers in the band. So that's what I was in amongst.

So you were in amongst really good players and musically it must have been very advantageous?

Well, we were just in a wee room not an awful lot bigger than this one and we just played chanters in there. Willie Young was a very strict teacher, he wrote everything on a blackboard and then we had to write it down in a music book. He was very strict. So it was very good for me in that respect.

If a bit tougher on the other side, the soldiering side.

So that was it, I did progress and he started me on piobaireachd then but I had never played piobaireachd before. I was taught from Angus MacKay's book, the old style of playing. Then in 1941, after Dunkirk, we were moved to Fort George amalgamated with the Seaforths and then my Pipe Major there was wee Donald MacLeod when Donald came back from Dunkirk. He was my teacher there and at that period in time he was going through to Inverness on a Wednesday and a Saturday afternoon to John Macdonald. He was teaching me piobaireachd then.

So you would be getting almost John Macdonald at one step removed type of thing?

That was very interesting. People would come and visit him there like wee Donald Maclean, Benderloch. Then, another person that came, he was actually called up from the Glasgow Police was Archie MacNab.

Oh, yes, I know the name.

I heard him playing and that was interesting for me, a young lad, I was only fifteen then.

That would be very much hearing people who were very good players.

Aye, I progressed a lot with him and I didn't do much else than play bagpipes.

Of course wee Donald had the reputation of being such a great teacher as well.

At that time, he was doing the composing jigs and hornpipes himself and every morning he would come across and he'd read the newspaper and have a cup of tea, there was a guy who made tea for

him and everything and then he would pick up the pipes and play for an hour, just off the cuff, stuff he had composed the night before. It was interesting.

So, you were still a boy soldier at this time?

Yes, I was.

So, when did you move into the Army kind of as a young soldier?

When I was seventeen and a half, I then had to go and do six months Army training and when that finished, it was 1943 then, the end of '43 D R McLennan, he was the Regimental Sergeant Major at Fort George so I had to go up and see him. He says "you're going down to Edinburgh Castle to Willie Ross" and at that time they were doing monthly courses for people. So I was sent down to Edinburgh Castle for a month and Willie Ross, he recognised me, and I really progressed a lot there, the first day I had memorised two piobaireachds played them to him. The rest of the people that were on the course were adults, from other regiments, from Canada and the like, they were doing different placements or whatever.

Yes, and doing the Piper Major's courses and other courses.

At the end of the month, I had to go back to Fort George and I was only back just a couple of weeks and I was sent for again by D R McLennan again and he said "it has been requested that you be sent back to the Castle". Willie Ross had requested that I be sent back there. I went back there and I stayed there another two or three months.

Was that just learning more and learning more, doing lots of playing?

Yes. There were people who used to visit him quite a lot, like Seton Gordon and a lot of people like that so anyway he would make me play to them and you know I guess I was pretty good. He made me

play jigs to his daughter, Cecily Ross, she was married there. Then, after that, I was sent to Europe to join the 5th Camerons in the Highland Division.

So, you were part of the 51st Highland Division. So whereabouts were they at that point and when was this?

It was very early 1945, going up the coast at Bremerhaven and Vught in Holland.

To Northern Germany?

We finished up in Cuxhaven away up in the North. There was nothing there, we were in civilian houses and the Pipe Major at that time was a chap who had been transferred from the Black Watch. He was from Dundee actually, Bob Lyle. He wasn't there very long because he'd been in since the start of the War so he had a low demob number. Then Angus MacDonald became Pipe Major.

Late of the Glasgow Police?

Aye, that's right, he was Pipe Major. Later on in 1945 before the Highland Division was demobbed, we had a week long games, sports there and the piping and that.

So you'd be competing at that?

I competed at that. I won the MSR and I was third in the piobaireachd.

Who beat you in the piobaireachd?

I think it was Ewan Angus, a Piper in the 5th Seaforths and there was another chap in the Black Watch. It was the first time I had met General Richardson, Frank Richardson. He was a medical doctor in another Scottish Division and he came there to be a judge. Another person was Donald Ramsay and a man from Perth, Angus MacKillop,

he was an officer in the Scottish Horse. They came and judged that and that was really my first go at it.

You were relatively old I suppose to be starting your competing?

Well, during the War there was really nothing to compete at. That was pretty much it.

Did you stay on in the Army after the War or what happened?

We had to stay on. We were disbanded in Brussels and we came back to Britain. Then in January 1947, I was on a troop ship for Japan and I finished up in Northern Malaya.

So this would presumably be originally to go to Japan as part of a kind of occupation force or something like that?

Yes.

And, of course, was there not an emergency in Malaya at that point?

That's right. The Chinese Communists' revolution so we were sent up there, Ipoh. That was a wee bit interesting because the C/O was A G L Maclean of Pennycross and the Company Commander and Band President was David Murray so that turned out to be a very good connection for me later on in piping with the Competing Pipers' Association. I went back to Britain then and I did a six week Highland dancing course with Donald MacLean, Big Donald MacLean. The Army, you know, after the War it wasn't the same, and so in 1949 I paid a hundred pounds and bought myself out of the Army and that was that.

So that was your military career finished?

Yes, there was no future in it for me then you know because I couldn't get a Pipe Major's course. Willie Ross had asked me when

they started the first one after the War, he requested that I be sent on it and so they said to me you'll need to stay on for another nine years [laughter].

So you weren't interested in that bit of the bargain?

No, I wasn't going to stay.

You left the Army in 1949, what happened next?

I had to start looking for a job, as I had never worked in my life before. I joined the Mackenzie Pipe Band in Dundee. Then there was an American company in Dundee, National Cash Register, NCR, so I was approached to start a Band for this company. I did that and it was very successful and with being in the company I got an opportunity to learn a trade, with the company, like turning, so I was in engineering for 17 years.

So you kind of took your chance to learn a trade at that point?

I did that and I got a wee bit tired of the pipe band, I had a family by this time, three children.

I was going to ask if you had got married in the interim?

Yes, I did and had three children. So, I left the pipe band.

Did you keep your competing going during this period?

No, I never competed. There was a local chap who had been competing and, I hadn't known this chap before, you might have known him, Peter Forbes. He came to my door and asked if he could borrow my Pipes [laughter] and then somehow we got talking and he was going around the Games. He said come round the Games and he had a car and that was it. The first Games were at Nethy Bridge and so I went to Nethy Bridge with him and I won two prizes.

So that was good, a bit of encouragement when you think there's something to be doing in this side of things.

He was talking about Inverness, he was obviously thinking about all the great players and everything and that was way above my level. So I entered for Inverness anyway and I didn't do anything in the piobaireachd, I did some things that weren't very good, I could only remember three piobaireachds. But I did win a couple of prizes with the March, Strathspey and Reel. I decided then that I needed to study so I went to Bob Brown then. Bob took me on.

When would this about?

I started with Bob Brown in 1965.

So really in the fifties had you been involved with the band and stuff like that and then kind of moved on and your solo piping career really started in the sixties?

That's right. I was in my forties then. That was really the best decision I ever made during my whole life. He changed my whole life. I went up to Balmoral and he says "Play something" and I played Donald of Laggan and he said "Yes, you've got it all but you need to learn to play it from your heart not your feet. Put down your pipes". So I put down my pipes, took out the practice chanter and he said "you can't use that, you need to use singing". So, that was it, from that point on every piobaireachd I played like that as a song. I progressed very quickly with him. It was just chemistry that worked. He was that kind of person. He very easily conveyed to you what he wanted. I did very well then, I mean I really started and I kind of dropped away from light music.

So what were the tunes that you were doing with him?

All the tunes, he would just say, he would give me three or four tunes and just say "now memorise them and as soon as you have them memorised, don't play too much till you come back". When I went

back he would comment on them. I wasn't long started with Bob when Malcolm MacRae came from Australia. Bob said to me there was a young Australian chap coming. I'd like you and him to do what Nicol and me did with Macdonald, the two of you come together for lessons and take different tunes so you can help each other out after these two years.

Was this the early seventies by this point?

When did Malcolm come here now?

Was it, 72 or 73, something like that?

No, it was before that actually, I think about 67.

Oh right, because I think he came and then he went back to Australia and then he came back.

Yes he went back. It would have been 1967 I think. So Malcolm and I did that for a few years. He was sharing a house in Hamilton with a New Zealand chap, Donald Bain. Donald was here for two years, and he was studying with Donald MacLeod. The day that Bob Brown was buried, I just started with Bob Nicol then, I had had some lessons from Bob because Bob Brown wouldn't teach you certain tunes, the likes of The Big Spree he said "you need to go to Nicol" but then when Bob died I just started with Bob Nicol then. Bob died in 1978.

And the other Bob died I think about 1972 or 1973, is that right?

1972, Bob Brown died, yes.

So yourself and Malcolm were going to both Bob Brown and Bob Nicol during that period?

Yes, basically all my piobaireachd teaching was from those two.

That was almost with a view to you entering Oban, Inverness and the big competitions, how did you get on with that in terms of gold medals?

Yes, I won both gold medals, Braemar Open, Glenfinnan, Dunvegan and Clasp and the Glenfiddich.

You were the first winner of the Glenfiddich.

So, yes, I did ok.

Absolutely, and what about, I mean, I suppose Murray Henderson would have come on the scene at some point as well?

That was a big part of that chunk in my life. After Donald Bain went back to New Zealand, about eighteen months or so after that, Donald wrote to me and said that there was a young person that he had been teaching and he was intending coming to Scotland for two years and that he would like me to teach him. Then I got a letter from this chap, Murray Henderson. So I wrote to him and told him to come and see me. He did, I recall there was a wee bit of snow on the ground, I think it must have been near Christmas when he arrived, and he had an older sister with him. I went and met the chap, he was in a B&B, and he told he was a farm labourer.

Yes, the family had a farm in New Zealand I think.

So I suggested to him that he might get a job on the farm up the road from me and he got a house. He did that, a got a house about three miles up the road from me and I started teaching him. I was assuming that he was going to be there for two years so I started teaching him and I think three times a week I was giving him lessons. He was a good enough player at that time but he had been criticised in New Zealand for the sound of his pipes being like a whistle you know and stuff like that. He was a very good student and obviously spent every evening playing the pipes.

He was very diligent.

He did well and then after I had been teaching him a couple of tunes and that I said to him that I would take him up to meet Bob Nicol, he had never met him, so we went and drove up to Ballater to meet Bob Nicol. He was a sharp kind of man, a real country kind of person there was something that he didn't like about Murray's playing, he didn't think his tp hand was right, and when we left Bob Nicol's house to go away home, Murray said to me "I don't want to go back there, I just want you to teach me" and that's what happened. Murray never went back to Nicol. I don't think Bob was ever a lover of his playing. For the next twelve years, well, he decided he wasn't going back after two years anyway and I felt sorry for him going out in a field in the cold mornings. At that time I had a workshop making reeds so I put another bench up beside mine and I said to him "I'll teach you to make reeds". I did that and then probably about six months later when he was able to do stuff and I said, because I was treating him like a son by this time, "give up your job on the farm and I'll make you a partner in the business" so that's what he did.

So you had actually set up yourself as a reed maker by that point as well?

Aye, that's right. Bob Nicol suggested to me that I should make them because he made them. Then Willie McCrostie was in business full time at that time and his son Derek, so Willie McCrostie, D R McLennan and Bob Nicol taught me to make reeds, I got that off the three of those people, and I started the business then.

Were you doing that full-time?

I was, yes. So, I gave Murray half the business and made him my partner and we were together like that basically day to day for twelve years.

So this would be really from the early seventies, mid-seventies up till sort of the early eighties? You would be teaching Murray

during the time when he won the Gold Medals and all the rest of it?

Oh yes, he was actually competing against me when I was teaching him and he used my pipes and he won some prizes. He was like a son to me, you know, I just took him into my family. He was a young guy away from home. So, Murray had all these piobaireachds teaching from me and he last two and a half years it was on a day to day basis because at that time we were in America and we'd be sitting in our workshop working away and every lunchtime I was an hour on it. I took him over to America, I was teaching in the Piping School at that time.

So, I suppose, at the same time, kind of roundabout this time, the Competing Pipers' Association was established. I mean, that was kind of 1977 or 1978. Is that right?

Aye. Now that was...

What I wanted to ask you about that was what the kind of impetus behind the Competing Pipers' Association was?

Well, the last year that they had the open one, George Lumsden was the last guy to play at quarter to eleven at night. Angus MacLellan won the medal that day so they made a decision that that was it, they wouldn't do that again, they would grade the players and there was a lot of talk, I don't know if you would remember that but there were three people, Seumas, John MacFadyen and John MacLellan and they used to call them The Three Wise Men [laughter]. There was a lot of talk about that they were going to do the grading on all the players and everybody wasn't that happy about it. There would be a conflict of interest. So, I just got the idea, why do we not do it for ourselves and that way then there wouldn't be any unfairness about the grading.

Was there any kind of concern about the standards of judging or anything of that nature at the same time?

No, no, it was just trying to do the grading.

On a level playing field.

Aye, that's right. This was where my connection with David Murray came in. I spoke to David Murray, he was the convener of Inverness at that time, and I said would there be any objection to us having a meeting on the Thursday at lunchtime on this and David was very supportive. So, I made out a little slip and when we arrived there on the Thursday morning to get their number, and they got a wee slip and at lunchtime they all came into the Cally Hotel in the bar there and I just proposed that if they're going to be grading, we should form ourselves a society and we would do it you see. Everybody was in agreement, some said "we don't want a union" and I said "no, it's nothing like that" because I didn't envisage it being a union either.

No, it was something which was going to grade the Pipers on a level basis.

So we formed this steering committee.

Who were the others on that?

I can tell you some of them that I can remember. We had to have a meeting that was the thing; we had got to get the thing started we had to do that before we were going to do anything. Seumas MacNeill was very supportive also and he said we could have a room in the Piping Centre so that is what happened. We met in the Piping Centre and we formed a committee, I was the President, Malcolm MacRae was the Vice-President, Hugh MacCallum was the Secretary, Tom Speirs was the Treasurer and then Angus MacLellan and two or three others who were on the Committee. We made the decision then that we would grade the players and that we would be an association. I came up with the idea, well, my thinking was that the easiest way for us to play it would be to compare ourselves with each other. So I made out a plan and I had a block with Donald MacPherson's name and I think maybe Pipe Major Angus MacDonald and I said if you

think you should be in the grade with them put your tick there. I had another box with another two names and if you think you should be there put yourself in there then. So, I sent that out to all the players and it all came back graded except for two. One was a person, I can't mind his name but he was up in the north east of Scotland and he was doing piping in Inverness, and at that period in time there were guys who used to come out all dressed up and he was of these guys. Another was a father who objected to his son being grading but the son graded himself. So, that's the way it worked out. We had another meeting at the hotel in Dunblane and that was the grade set.

I suppose the Silver Medals came out of that really?

David Murray accepted this for Inverness but I never thought about Oban and then they decided they would have twenty five at the Gold Medal or something like that, because I knew David, I put a proposal to David that would you start the Silver Medal if the competing pipers paid the prize money and bought the medal and supplied the judges, so he agreed to that. I think myself Andrew Wright and Donald MacPherson were the first of the judges, so that started the Silver Medal.

What about Oban?

Well, after Inverness, Oban came on board so that worked out very well. As I say it was never meant to be a union, it was just a way of working and I would have thought the way was to work with Inverness, so that started the Silver Medal.

Well, something had to be done about that. I mean, piobaireachd competitions running from about nine o'clock in the morning until eleven o'clock at night was ridiculous.

So it was very well received and we were very diplomatic about it and then, of course, we started getting involved in other things.

What sort of other things?

Well, judges, I was not involved in a lot of their stuff. When I was the President, after I finished with the Competing Pipers' Association, I was on the Music Board or Committee on the BBC, then when I retired from the piping, I was invited to join the Glenfiddich Grants Board to organise grants and so on, which brought us into contact with people who were running the games a bit more.

So I suppose by this time, this would be the late seventies, early eighties and you'd won the first Glenfiddich, you were doing the stuff with the Competing Pipers' Association and then presumably, well, you were saying about thirty years ago you moved to the United States so how did that all come about?

I guess it started when Seumas MacNeill asked me in 1973 "would you be interested in going and teaching in Canada at a Piping School?" I said "yes" so he said "you've never heard of this place before, it's called Timmins". I said "I know where Timmins is, I had three students from Timmins". When I was in Germany the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa sent three players to us to be taught to play the pipes, and I remembered these guys.

And they were from Timmins, yes.

So I went there and he was there the first year to do the schools, Seumas, Duncan Johnstone was there for some time and Kenny MacLean, he started it and I ran it for ten years. The next year Alex Duthart came to the school. We started in America, Alex and I were invited to come to America and he and I then we travelled all the time, we were the odd fellows. I was the tidy one [laughter]. So we did that for many years, we set up schools all over here, then we had Timmins and then I went out and started a school in Calgary and Alex came. I was invited down to the States, to Pennsylvania, it was just a small school there and there was another chap there from down south and he came there to meet me and so he started the Balmoral Schools over in North Carolina and Alex started bringing Bertie Barr, so I just retired from doing that stuff about three years ago. I started schools

out in Kentucky, out in Washington State, Colorado, I would go and set up the school and that was it.

So that was kind of your introduction to that?

Yes, when we were in the schools in Valley Forge. The school there had a big weekend workshop and there was a Scottish family there from Wishaw, Motherwell, the McConnells. Mark McConnell had been in the Cameronians so they spoke to me and I became friendly with Mark and Carol, Carol is still alive, she has the Scottish store, and I became very friendly with them, Mark and Carol and they invited me to come over, and Mark would sponsor me. That's really how that came about. At the last minute, Murray Henderson and his wife decided they would come too. They stayed two and a half years. I got married then over here. Her parents were from Motherwell and she played the pipes too. She's a piping judge and Cowal champion dancer and she lived in Pittsburg so when I got married I moved to Pittsburg because I had been living in Delaware and I rented a place from Mark and Carol. So, I moved to Pittsburgh and I was approached by Carnegie Mellon University, to start a programme there. Andrew Carnegie started that school, so I did that and, I can't remember some of the dates, it was '82 I moved to America. I was also involved at this time in the Pipe Band Association. They asked me to join the Music Board. It was a pretty chaotic situation at that time, it wasn't very professional. So, I proposed, "look you need to do something about the judging". So we did, we set up the judges' thing and I wrote out examinations for piobaireachd.

So that there was a standard set?

Twenty eight years ago I did that and that has carried on. Anybody who wants to judge these days in the States you have to go through this programme.

Is that for Pipe Bands and Solo Piping?

Aye, that's right. So they go through that process and after they do the exams they go out as apprentice judges to judge and write score sheets so that was a very good thing.

Yes, it brought the standard up and brought the professionalism up.

Yes, the standard was open again, the open players had two tunes and we raised it to six and we produced Gold Medallists. The whole thing just changed and it's that way today.

And with Carnegie Mellon, the view there was to set up a piping programme. Was this as part of a Music Faculty?

Well, it initially started to teach the students to play bagpipes, any student who wanted to play bagpipes, so that's how I started. I still had my business so I was doing both at that time. Then, in 1989, I got the school to introduce a four year undergraduate degree in piping. I had a piping student who was the lead oboist there in Pittsburgh and he advised me, he said "You're qualified far higher than these people here" so the Music Department was very willing. The Faculty accepted it. So I did that and I joined the Faculty in the Music Department so I started writing all that stuff, make up the curriculum and that sort of thing.

Yes, make up the curriculum and do all that sort of stuff.

I did that, then I retired the first time when I was seventy one and a half. I retired then and I started doing other stuff. I had other things I was interested in doing and I still had the business but I started writing a book but I haven't finished it yet. I just have a problem getting someone to do music on a computer Finale system so I'm back to working on it. I had to put it on the back burner because literally as I soon as I retired my wife and I adopted a wee boy, a baby at birth. My wife taught school, she was a school teacher and I just had to put everything on the back burner.

Yes, because that's a big commitment.

So I did that but I still did some on the book and other things. Another winter, I recorded thirty-five CDs of all the piobaireachds and gifted that to Carnegie Mellon and St Thomas School for an archive. I kept on doing stuff like that.

What sort of numbers of students were you getting on the four year degree course?

Oh, they are good.

At first, was it quite low numbers, or was it quite healthy from the start?

Well, I would have to say no but not because of the programme. It was just the mentality of pipers; at that point, they thought "Oh I play the pipes" but you're looking for something totally different, a totally higher standard. You had to be academically qualified because it's a really top school and it costs a lot of money, but it has changed. Then I was called back again into the School in 2008, I was called back to the school to teach and so I did another two and a half, three years and then we advertised for a person. I chaired that committee and we appointed Andrew Carlisle who was very good because Andrew had just finished his PhD.

So he's got the academic side and the Piping side?

Oh yes, then when I was retiring that time, I said to the head of the department... [laughter]

You're a man of many retirements.

They were thanking me and I said if you want to thank me there is one thing I would like to see you doing, a two year Masters Degree, so the School did that and they now have a two year Masters Degree in Piping.

That is presumably performance plus background and stuff like that.

Oh yes, research, I think one of the chaps who was in it this past year came over to Glasgow just to do a wee bit of studying in the archives over there.

Oh right, who was that then?

Andrew Beaufort. Andrew was the first student to come through; he just completed undergraduate and went straight into the Masters.

So in terms of students and stuff like that I think obviously you taught a lot of people over the years, which of the students, maybe apart from Murray, have been really very successful in their Piping careers in terms of competition and things like that?

He was obviously the most successful prize-winner over that period of time. He was a very good student. I can hear his tunes and his playing today and as I say he has been very loyal to me and he's teaching what I taught, what he was given from me. I was Murray's sole teacher in piobaireachd, but Mike Cusack, he started with me when he was seventeen and he won the medal and another chap Mike Rodgers, he won the medal. I had three fifteen year olds in piobaireachd, him, Donald MacPhee and another chap Calum MacDonald, so the three of them won medals. The first year I went to Timmins, I had a..., there was this young fifteen year old girl from Ottawa and she was on the point of giving up because nobody in Ottawa would teach a girl. So I started teaching that girl, Amy Gobel, Amy Garson as she is now, and she won the Silver Medal and she was the first lady to compete in the Glenfiddich. She stayed with me until just a couple of months and she'd win the Medal still, she can still play, but she has a family and she's a maritime lawyer for the Canadian military so she's a very busy person.

So she's got a very busy job.

Then Bruce Gandy was with me and then there was a couple of other chaps from New Zealand that I had as students, John Hanning, he won the Gold Medal. John was a gentleman, very nice guy and there was another chap at the same time, Ian Hinds, he was runner-up in the Gold Medal at Inverness. Then there was Robert Barnes. I don't like to say, they weren't my students but I assisted Jack Lee and Tom Speirs. I work now with Andrew Carlisle and a couple of girls that were over competing last year and I'm assisting a couple of other people, Americans you know.

Yes, going through tunes with them and stuff like that.

I do a piobaireachd workshop in the house every month.

And, of course, you teach on the web and things like that as well. You teach on the internet because I've seen some stuff, is it from the Pipe Band Association?

Yes, just about three years ago I was asked to chair the Music Board again and I thought what can I do because there's a lot of areas in America, if you go down to Louisiana for instance, there are people who want to play piobaireachd but nobody to teach them. So one of my students is a professional video person so I said I was going to start trying to teach people so I got that idea, doing the Learning Channel and that's been very successful. The first response I got was Hong Kong, Australia, it was great, the Philippines, a Scottish guy in the Philippines.

Yes, learning Piobaireachd on the internet.

I did that and just another three weeks ago I put another three tunes on. People are getting the use of that, they're not having to pay or anything like that. I never thought about payment and I didn't want to be involved in any stuff like that. But I've never charged for lessons because Brown and Nicol never charged me a penny for my lessons

and I'm doing the same. So I've been the same, I am 88 now, you know, you just want to do what you can to help.

I suppose one of the other things I wanted to ask you was looking back over your piping career, outstanding players, outstanding performances, are there any that spring to mind that you've heard in terms of really great players? I don't want to put you on the spot.

No, no but it is right that you ask me that.

Yes, because your piping memory goes away back to before the Second World War.

Well, when I started going back over there again about three or four years ago to teach, I really went because I was sending students over there and they were coming back with comments which I couldn't understand why they should have had them so I thought I'd better see what's happening. I recall that Rob Wallace interviewed me the day after the Gold Medal and I maybe should have thought a wee bit before talking I might have been a wee bit critical but there were things I saw that I didn't like. That's the probably just teaching, there wasn't a lot of song or rhythm in the tunes, you know the way that I sing all the time and teach and I did see something which is really my biggest concern about piping today. They were playing the embellishments differently; I've researched this a bit because it bothered me. I would say the person who is responsible for changing the way was Alex Cameron because when the older books were printed, the embellishments were written differently and if you look at Angus Mackay's book, that I was taught from, you couldn't mistake the way they should be played or taught. About 1895 when Glen's book was updated it was Alex Cameron that assisted him and they started using abbreviations. Thomason's *Ceòl Mòr* in 1900 didn't and the first books that the Piobaireachd Society published, they published five volumes, away back before the first edition in 1935.

Yes, between 1908 and the First World War.

Yes, the first volume was written in the old way but then the other volumes started introducing the embellishments as abbreviations. Binneas didn't it's written in the old style. So, the movements are being taught differently today and played differently and I detected that as soon as I heard them playing in Inverness and that's the concern that I have today. In America here, just last week, I was doing a workshop and I said to this person, when I am teaching I will say, "just play the first line of the piobaireachd and the variation to me" and they play, and I can detect immediately then if they've been taught the dre movement correctly and I'll say to the person "could you let me see how you were taught to play the dre movement and they'd tell me E gracenote down to Low A" and I'd say "that's the problem because that should be E that you sound, you don't accent Low A, and it's the same with the movement on F, the dare movement, you are now saying to play an E gracenote on F, and that is wrong, there's an extra gracenote going in, but that's what they're teaching and my concern is that the tutor books which are published today that's the way they're playing. That's a concern I have, that the system of teaching the embellishments has been changed. The D throw, it's the same thing. One woman who played that year to me in Inverness, she played Macdonald's Tutor but the first three things she played to me in the first bar of the ùrlar, were all wrong, [sings] a long extended G on the D throw. You see, in the old books that was three semi demi quavers.

Yes, there wasn't that big low G in the middle of it or at the start of it rather.

So, that's really a concern to me.

And, of course, I suppose in something in a movement like that it then tends to drag the tune back because you've actually got that embellishment that's lasting a lot longer than it needs to last. That's the kind of major concern...

That's something that I suggested to Andrew Carlisle in his programme to get someone to go back and research exactly the way the music is written and how it has changed the interpretations of the embellishments. I think that's something the Piping Centre and the College of Piping and the Piobaireachd Society should be working on.

I think the great thing I suppose is that over the course of your time in piping, the piping has changed so much that there are now people doing that kind of thing and they're able to do the research and things like that.

There's a programme now in Glasgow.

Yes, in Glasgow, that's right and there are all these young people coming out on it.

One of the problems I think with us in piping is that we play and we never think a lot about what we're playing which is bad. Because for me I'm a teacher and I see things in teaching all the time and when you see somebody coming up to play a tune and you get this movement, the dare movement and you think, now who's teaching that?

It's in the new tutor books that are being published today. They've got and that's the way they do it so I think that is the one concern that I have about piping and its future. As a teacher of piping that is a change that's not good.

And I suppose with yourself being in the States you'll maybe notice that more than people in Scotland would actually notice it.

Well, I've done all the teaching here in the United States, basically a lot of my students are now teachers and it's a custom they're not used to seeing it here. Another place where it is not happening, for instance, is Brittany, I used to teach out there. When Bob Nicol retired from that, I took that over and then Jackie Pincet. Jackie was probably been my longest friend in piping. We met in 1964 I think. I was over there last year and they don't do that. I think when you're in

isolation you tend to think you're purer. It's very easy for something to be accustomed here and to think that's the way it works.

I've kind of come to the end of what I want to ask you. Is there anything else you want to add?

I think I've been talking too much.

No, not at all. It's all about you.

I'm the only guy left in this business.

I think it's great to hear that sort of wealth of experience and you've been involved in it for such a long time.

Well, I've met a lot of very interesting people. Another very interesting person I met was in Glasgow during the War and he was a piper in the Glasgow Police, Tommy Grant, you maybe wouldn't know him.

Well, do you know, I don't know if I should say this but Tommy Grant's daughter and my wife are very good friends.

Oh, Tommy's father was the stationmaster down in Helensburgh.

I'll talk a bit more about it later but Tommy's daughter and my wife are colleagues.

Is that right? Well, Tommy was my friend and Adam Scott and the three of us went around together but we came down to Glasgow for a weekend, it would be 1944 then, and Tommy was a policeman on the beat down in Govan at Govan Cross and we were down there this night and I just stopped there and there was a bar, Alex's Bar in Boyd Street, I think that's the name, it was owned by a boxer [words not intelligible] but it was a Skye man, Alex Macdonald, that now had it and we were in there this day, it was about five o'clock or something, he always had a chanter under the bar, and this man came in with

dungarees on. He was standing there, and somebody says, that's a piper over there, a well-known piper, Willie Fergusson, and I played all his tunes. So we met and spoke, he was a very nice man, very quiet, he went over to the table and he had a practice chanter and he took me through all his tunes that he composed. I really admired him. He was a very quiet man, great composer.

A great band and a great Pipe Major as well.

Yes, the Clan MacRae Society, that was the band to beat, that was the band to beat. I met a lot of interesting people... Roddy MacDonald, a lot of the old players. One of the things that I asked both Brown and Nicol was who were the best players in Piobaireachd they heard? They both said Malcolm Macpherson, he was in the Camerons with me.

He was the one who died young, well, he was relatively young when he died?

Yes, he was put out of the Army. That was sad. Bob Brown said that the best player he heard that never won the Gold Medal was Norman Meldrum, who was a worker on Farquharson's estate at Braemar; he thought he was a great player. But Bob Brown to me was the musician, he was a great teacher. So was Nicol, he was a good teacher too. Bob Brown was very sensitive, you know, quiet in his manner. He wouldn't say anything to offend you, you know. Bob Nicol was not like that. He would say what he thought, he would just tell you. One thing about Bob Nicol, there was always people coming in and there were a lot of people up in the north, Stewarts, they were all pipers, tinkers

Aye, travelling folk.

Yes, travelling folk, and I recall being in Bob's house this night and this man had his son there and he had a fine set of silver and ivory pipes, and I remarked then "that's a fine set of pipes", and he said "I've got another set of pipes" just out with it. When they went away

Bob says “Oh, they’re that close if you gave them one of them a kick up the behind they would a’ dingle” [laughter]. Bob Nicol was a very exacting teacher too. He used to sit in the chair just with us and...and I always felt that he was wanting to make us play it quicker than I wanted to. Then when you did play, it wasn’t uick enough when you were performing. I remember I recorded The Big Spree with the BBC one time and I’d gone up to him before doing this because he was very particular about the Ceòl Mòr setting, people hadn’t heard that before, and the next time I went back to him he says “you didn’t get these two C’s right” [sings] and that’s what he said, you didn’t get these C’s right. So he was a very exacting player and the other thing that was interesting when I asked young Bob Brown, who I still correspond with, who did he think the best player was, he always said Nicol. He had to sit and listen to them playing their tunes before they went to Inverness and he said Nicol was the better player than his Dad was.

It is interesting to get that sort of insight into it.

I like Bob Brown’s playing because every time you listen to it you see something else coming in, timings and subtle little things. He thought like a musician. When I went to work in the Faculty at Carnegie Mellon I started to get a different appreciation of music, you know, like the use of cadences in music. We never talk about that in bagpiping, we never talk about it, as bagpipers, what the purpose of it is. So I started getting a different appreciation of the music then and there was one day I was playing a recording to an oboe player because I was teaching him piobaireachd and it was actually a tune that Bob Brown was playing “The Departure of King James” and when he came to the end of the line, he picked up on this, he says to me “that’s so nice, that’s the retard that he played”. I had never heard that before but he picked that out in Bob Brown’s playing and I thought Bob Brown was doing those things. I don’t know if somebody said to him “do this”. That was just feeling for the music. That’s what he said, he did a retard, when he came to the end of the line so he just elongated it, resolution. I think that’s learning with a different understanding. This Learning Channel that I did I try to impart a wee bit of that in

there about the cadences, end of the line, in the middle of the line there's a comma, I don't know how to describe it, at the end of the line there's a finale and there's a period.

Aye, there's a full stop there.

Today there's a poor understanding of that, a wee bit in the piobaireachd playing.

You were talking before about piobaireachd perhaps being a bit more mechanical now than it has been and that's maybe part of what makes it so, you know.

There's more book playing today I think today. People just use the book. Brown said the oral teaching was the way. When I worked in engineering I was on the night shift for three months and that was from a Piobaireachd Society book, singing, singing singing. Every time you started on it you sounded a wee bit different because you'd sing and that added feeling. I still play two or three piobaireachds every day. But there are some great young kids over here as well. It's just having the mindset, you know, and the dedication, you have got to have the backbone, not a wishbone. There's one or two at the moment that could really go far and win the Gold Medal because they've absolutely, oh, they've got the hands for it.

They've got the hands and the other stuff as well.

A lot of them today they get involved in pipe bands and they go from a band here and a band there but probably not giving it the undivided attention that it needs. They are getting it in the schools now.

Oh yes, there are big teaching programmes with kids being taught in the schools. I think we see a lot of kids at the Piping Centre like that, they're very keen, very focused and very into it and I think one of the other things that has happened at the Piping Centre, as you know, the National Youth Band being set up and stuff like that, that's very good because it brings kids from all the

country together and that's really important, you know, they've got that focus. I think it's certainly, I don't know how you would see it, but to me it seems that the Piping Centre is in a good place in terms of numbers.

Well, it never had stuff like that before when I was in it.

That's right and they've got the degree course now and they can go and get an academic education with their piping as well.

I started a Piping Society at Broughty Ferry and that's where I started teaching kids and other people started doing piping societies. It was the only centres you had. I've had a good innings and I was fortunate as well that I was awarded the MBE as well and the Balvenie Medal.

It's nice to get these things in recognition of your work.

Since I started with Bob Brown, when I came back into piping, I really dedicated myself to teaching. When I went out to Australia, I went to Adelaide where there was a Bob Brown Society. I went out there a couple of times and these people told me that when Brown was there and he had told them that he thought I would be the one that would keep his teaching going and I've always felt that and it's a lot of responsibility. It's not something that's displeased me or has been hard to do. I enjoyed teaching and I cannae say no. [laughter]

Well, that's a good thing. Well, can I just thank you for taking the time to talk to us. It's been great that you know that we've had somebody in the programme that we're doing at the Piping Centre and who has had the time and piping that you've had, the breadth of experience in piping you've had, and, you know, for me running the programme, the oral history programme, it's great to have that addition to it because it complements a lot of the work that we've done. We've interviewed Murray Henderson, we've interviewed Malcolm MacRae and there's all of that and we've interviewed numerous other people whom you will have competed against, the likes of Hugh McCallum and so on, so

it's nice to get that kind of rounded picture of it and get your view of it. We're finding that the kids who are coming to the Centre are actually making use of these interviews as part of their projects that they are doing and things like that. It's just so valuable to have it.

Oh, that's good, anything that I could do that would help I'd be pleased to do it.

That would be fine. It may well be that we should continue this discussion at another time.

We'll maybe have another period of my life. Well, what I've told you today I've tried to be as honest and impartial as I possibly can.

The great thing about oral history is that it's about somebody's experience and somebody's take on things and that's really part of it. So, with that, I would just like to say, Jimmy, thank you very much for taking part in Noting the Tradition.

Thank you too, I'll buy you a wee drink. That must be thirsty work.

That would be very nice, thank you very much.

