



NOTING THE TRADITION

An Oral History Project from the National Piping Centre



Supported by
The National Lottery®
through the Heritage Lottery Fund



Interviewee John Davidson Kelly

Interviewer Terry O' Neill

Date of Interview 24th April 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 Terry O'Neill for the Noting The Tradition Project in the National Piping Centre, 24th of April 2013, at half past five, interview with Mr John Davidson Kelly. John, how are you?

I'm fine thanks Terry.

Excellent. Just generally have an approach of looking at the interview from when you began piping. So if you could perhaps give me some indication about when you started piping and why you took it up.

Well I started in about 1951, as a schoolboy. I took it up I suppose because my family were keen on piping. There were no pipers in my family, but my father loved piped bands and my mother and her brother, my uncle, loved solo piping. I was brought up in Edinburgh and I suppose, before the Tattoo started, but we always went to listen to the Tattoo and bands playing and of course the Edinburgh City Police played down Princes Street and so on; we used to go and listen to them and enjoy that, and listened to solo players when we could. So I suppose the long and short of it was when I was old enough to attend a class at school, I turned up encouraged by my parents and started learning the chanter, which wasn't very successful. I don't think we were taught by someone who was awfully good and I can't remember his name, but I remember his classroom with lots of my friends and this funny wee man who reeked of tobacco and things. [Laughter] Most of us gave it up after a year or two, but I learnt half a dozen I suppose of the basic tunes like Highland Laddie and so on, and then stopped playing. But then my younger brother took it up and that encouraged me to take it up again.

So how did you progress from there?

Well I suppose until my mid forties, I never had any more lessons. I acquired a set of pipes by good fortune really and as I read music adequately I suppose, I played a lot of slow airs etc by ear; I listened to tunes I liked and thought, oh well, I'll try and learn that and I played. I was working in the South of England so I played for my own pleasure, ceilidhs and Hogmanay and so on, but we had Skye connections and my uncle had a house on Skye and we spent a lot of the summertime there, so we'd play a lot.

Yes, there's a little bit of a distance though between being at school, when you say you were a schoolboy, of about twelve-ish, and in your forties when you acquired a set of bagpipes?

No, I acquired the bagpipes when I was at University and I acquired them when my brother got onto a school set around about the time I left school and we'd have a long holiday in Skye there, and there was lots of piping and singing, writing poetry and doing all sorts, swimming and walking etc. I obviously must have been able to play these pipes fairly easily. I suppose he probably showed me. I don't know, that's something I do not remember. I then went to Oxford and in my first year a Glaswegian friend of mine, who I still see quite a lot, said "oh John you're a piper", so I must have been talking about pipe music and so on, so he said "do you want a set of pipes?" I said yes tell me about it. "An English friend of mine is clearing out his attic and has found an old set of pipes and doesn't want them and wants a fiver for them." I said, "I'll take them" and I knew it was worth it because my brother had just brought, or rather my parents had brought for my brother a set of pipes from Glen's shop in Edinburgh, costing about twenty pounds. These were an interesting set anyway. So I bought this five pound set, took them back to Edinburgh, went to George Stoddart, who at that stage I think it was Hardie's shop in the Lawnmarket he ran, got a new bag,

bag cover, new chanter, reeds for another five pounds, so I had a set of pipes that worked and have served me well for the rest of that time.

Great, half price!

Well absolutely, half that price anyway. So I've always had a set of pipes and therefore I've always played them. I just learn tunes of my own, listen to things, probably forgot some of the tunes I knew, probably started making mistakes in my technique and so forth. I enjoyed it though. I did a lot of piping. But I was also involved in the piping world because of this connection with Skye, as my uncle had a house and later on I had a house in Skye and we were all very friendly with Dame Flora and her family. I was involved in the very start of the Silver Chanter because we were always in Skye and I used to produce friends and guests to help them move furniture in the castle and so on for that, and eventually got on to the Committee. But we'd always listen to piping in Skye, so we were quite friendly with John MacFadyen and people like that and so on. I was very fortunate just to be in touch with that kind of thing and to listen to great players playing well.

And your visits to Skye would have been every summer?

I was a schoolmaster so yes.

You got a job up in Skye?

No I didn't get a job. I was working in the South of England and then in South Wales for twenty odd years, but we had a house in Skye, so I would whizz up for a week at Easter to clean it up and then would spend a month or six

weeks in the summertime, which always coincided with the Skye Games and the Silver Chanter and so on.

And when you were in Oxford, were there any societies that you might have joined there that might have existed at that time? That would have been about the 60s?

Yes absolutely. '59-'63 I think were my dates there. I don't think there was any piping society as such. There were certainly several Scottish societies. I mean there was a very active Scottish Country Dance Society and there was a Scottish society where we all read papers about whatever Scottish things interested us. I certainly played at all my college's rugby club dinners and things like this.

So you were a star for that then?

It was quite useful. [Laughter].

You were the “go to guy” for those events.

In my college, yes.

Did you get involved within any of the other kinds of scenes though, such as the folk scenes that had begun to grow at that time?

Well a little bit, but in fact I did quite a lot of folk singing. I sang traditional Scots and some Gaelic songs as a very much amateurish person. And sometimes I would play the pipes.

And would that have been at local gigs or local pubs?

Yes it was local to that. But I was also involved in the Clan MacLeod Society which had branch in London and

certainly I remember going up there and singing at a ceilidh. I don't think I piped at that because there was some MacCrimmon who used to play there at that particular time.

So were you known for your singing as well?

Well, in a very limited amateur sort of area.

But respected at least for that.

I think people still sometimes ask me to sing the same songs that I sang forty years ago.

When you said you played, you indicated that you picked a lot up by ear, you do read some music?

And it's got better with practice.

Absolutely, but it didn't seem to be too much instruction, for want of a better phrase, between your school years and adult years. There wasn't...How did you develop technique and how did you engage with the varying styles of piping?

Well, I suppose with technique we had an old book. I suppose it was the very first of these College of Piping tutors, so I had that and I used that for brushing up on some of my technique and the rest of it I think probably just got less good to be honest. I thought I played quite satisfactorily, quite musically and the kind of nice easy stuff that I tended to play.

It's really about technique and style of playing.

I tried to play the way that I enjoyed listening to the tunes. That's not a very good way of putting it. But I was aware

of the fact there were different styles of piping. Obviously I was aware; I didn't play at that stage any piobaireachd. That was what I really loved listening to and I knew there were different styles of piobaireachd playing, you can hear it listening to them and the same with the east and west coast playing. It was always the west coast style that I tended to prefer, because I always thought it was more musical really than the east coast. But if I liked a tune, I would try and play it sort of like that. I listened to lots of tapes. I remember playing a tune that I first heard John Burgess play on a tape I have "Lonely Loch nan Eun" and I competed with it once in the Royal Scottish Pipers Competition in Edinburgh. Walter Drysdale was judging and he said "oh you played with lots of soul, heart or something, but you made lots of mistakes". Now I reckon I knew what I did. I played it as John Burgess played it, rather than as you would, which meant he held all his high A's significantly longer. So I suppose that's what I did. I listened to stuff, and thought I like that, that's how I would like to play it.

Now the different societies then, do you feel that any competition that you went into with the societies, do you feel that there may have been one shift towards one style rather than other where one side prefer the east or west, how did you find your feet in the competitions if you competed that much?

Well I competed a bit with the Royal Scottish Pipers and I competed a bit with the Glasgow Highland Club. I do with them all the time, every year. I played for a while at the Archie Kenneth. I think so much depended on the judges really. It depended who was judging and I think judges are probably a lot more lenient to amateur players in general, but with occasional famous exceptions than they would be. I think the judges in amateur competitions if they hear good pipes being well played and a musical

interpretation etc, they're obviously not going to worry so much about the style.

Okay. The period during the 60's, very folk driven in the UK, and you've done some singing. Did you find that your piping was something that you had to seek out opportunities for, or were you quite happy? Which would you have preferred singing or piping?

I think at that stage, I preferred singing really because it was much easier. Insofar as I carried my instrument around, as it were with me. I didn't have to have problems getting reeds and so on. I had been living in the South of England or in South Wales which I was by the late 70's, early 80's. It was much more difficult to get reeds. I would come up to Scotland twice a year certainly and for years I would get reeds from George Stoddart as long as he was producing reeds and then I would buy them from whoever would sell them. But you know the trouble pipers have with getting decent reeds and reeds that go well in their pipes anyway, so that's hard work. In a way, it was much easier to sing in that respect, as long as you don't forget your words. (Laughter). You can go and do it. Your voice may not be as good today as it was yesterday, but it's not going to have the same problems. I enjoyed them both and I suppose at that stage I thought I was probably a better singer than piper. But I do enjoy doing both, so I was always happy to do whichever it was.

I fully appreciate what you were saying about finding particular reeds especially then. Finding reeds now maybe a little easier. So from the 60s into the 70s you've obviously got your professional career was settled in, where did piping go at that stage when you're into the 1970s?

For me, it just carried on really as it had been. I played socially. I played at lots of events. Friends asked me to play at their weddings, well they always had done. I'd got a marvellous party in the middle of Germany for a German friends 60th birthday. I played at a wedding in Australia. Much later on in the 90's, I played at a wedding in Budapest. I played a lot in Skye, I played for pleasure really. I suppose on the occasions that I would be passing through Edinburgh when there would be a Royal Scottish Pipers evening on, I might go and spend an evening with them, listening and joining in playing. I would also go and listen to piping recitals when I could and competitions when I could. But I would say I was marking time really but not letting it disappear.

So practice then in those days, how much did you do and how difficult was it to fit in with not only your working life, family life as well?

Practice is always easier at least for me, if you've got something coming up. I might leave my pipes for a month or so and then think about something that's coming up and then I would practice. But other times I would just say I am going to come back from Skye I will practice every day and play the pipes every day. I tended at that stage, to enjoy playing my tunes rather than practicing. I did have occasional pupils as well so I did teach people at the school who happened to want to. I worked in boarding schools when I was down south, so they were on site and people knew that I played the pipes. I sometimes played at school functions. I did have some pupils and that did mean I did have to think and do some work, and actually did have to revise certain bits of technique [laughter]. None of my pupils were very successful however but that was only partly due to me, it was partly themselves I think.

It must have been fun though wasn't it?

Oh yes it was. I greatly enjoyed that.

The piping then, as you said, you played the tunes that you knew you wanted to play, rather than engaged in full technical practice.

Absolutely yes. Most of my practice would be learning a tune that I wanted to learn. Then if there was some wretched movement I didn't really know, then I would have to try and work on it.

An interesting question that comes from that is how did you get over the wretched movement? [Laughter].

I think some of them I skipped around and didn't play properly.

Improvisational.

There'd be some improvising or some cutting, or I might have cut out a doubling here and just played a G gracenote. I might have done something like that. But when I started playing more seriously, I did have to do some work, I still have to concentrate sometimes and think that I don't always play this very well.

That seems to have been your career, to be set in as a routine if you like, when you stopped playing, when you picked it back up again, because your brother did, and it's just been the tunes that you liked, all through your career. Is that still the case?

No. When I came to Glasgow which I did in 1986, I decided it was silly really to have played the pipes all my life and love them and not do something better. I was very

keen to play piobaireachd, which as I said I had always listened to and enjoy listening to and always thought it was tricky to play. I took a year or two, I got involved in the Glasgow Highland Club for other reasons and I didn't play with them for a year or two. I taught at Glasgow Academy and started a school band because I knew much more about piping than the man who was running it. I found after two or three years looking for somebody, I found an instructor. I used to run the band myself with the boy pipe-major because I was very particular about the kind of person who was going to instruct the band. Eventually I came across Kenny MacDonald, who I thought was an absolutely brilliant musician and who I liked very much. So I got him to instruct the band. I thought to myself that here's a chap, I liked his musicality and his approach to piping and so on, so I had lessons from him for pretty well the rest of his life.

Was that when you formally if you like, began to play piobaireachd?

Yes. He kept saying you must learn piobaireachd, and I would say, "Kenny I am going to soon", and then in the Highland Club we decided, a lot of us who were keen on piobaireachd, we'd have a piobaireachd seminar; and this all came about at the same sort of time, in the late 80's.

Did that change for you? Was that a milestone in your playing?

Yes, I think it probably was. It really did mean that I wanted to work at the movements and I wanted, perhaps much more memorizing, and I wanted to learn these tunes, and I suppose it was music I wanted to play. If I had my life again, I would have thought that piobaireachd was a lot easier than it really is. If I could have found down south

someone to teach me, but teaching was too hard work to take an hour's trip to London once a week to be taught.

Your own professional job as a teacher.

Yes that's right. Starting to play piobaireachd really did encourage me and inspire me quite a lot.

And from then through the 90's till now, has that been the basis or a foundation for you, for your playing and for your entry into competitions?

Yes, though I wouldn't say entirely, because I always enjoy playing 6/8 marches and slow airs and so on. I always played them for pleasure, but it certainly enhanced my enjoyment of piping and it made it much more worthwhile, I suppose.

You've got the wrong aim down. Is it more that you certainly have a serious interest in the art as well as your ability to have a lot of fun going to Budapest for a wedding and playing for people.

Yes, sure. I think that one of my greater successes in winning a couple of events in the Highland Club Competition, that was before I competed with piobaireachd certainly. I think the whole thing of coming back to Scotland having someone to instruct me and running a band as well and therefore thinking about how people were playing and what they were doing in tunes and music, it was interesting to me, that's helped to focus the whole thing.

Coming back a little bit now to your friendship with Dame Flora and the development of those Societies and competition, how much did that influence you at the time?

I think it influenced me quite a lot.

Was there anyone in particular that was an influence?

Over the years there were a number of people who inspired me. John MacFadyen was a great inspiration in his competing days. My family and I, my mother and my uncle, my brothers would argue always as to who of John MacFadyen, or John MacLellan, or whoever it was. We didn't hear much of Donald MacLeod, because he didn't play very much in the Dunvegan Medal. But people like this at that time made one appreciate the differences in the sounds of peoples' pipes and the differences in their style, and differences in tunes. Tunes you thought were lovely and then you heard someone else playing and thought, "That's not really so good at all!" [Laughter]. It was nothing to do with the tune, it's only to do with the player that's the problem. I think my friendship with Dame Flora and that lot meant that I was on the periphery of the real piping world if you like, and I knew quite a lot of these people very well. I then employed pipers to play at various functions and because I knew top pipers, I could get top pipers to come and play. It pleased me, but it also brought them to a wider audience.

When did you do anything like that?

Well I ran a lot of Clan MacLeod parliaments which happened every four years in Skye and this would be in the 70's and 80's. Apart from local Skye pipers, people like John MacFadyen and Iain MacFadyen, John Burgess, and so they all played at that stage and then more recently it's been Dr Angus and Ewen MacCrimmon has played for several occasions. I have done quite a lot of things with Ewen, in fact both on Skye, we did a thing in New Zealand a few years ago.

Has there been much international travel involved throughout your career?

Well there has been a bit of international travel, either socially or because of the Clan MacLeod which I am deeply involved in. That has involved piping sometimes. The New Zealand thing was really by far, the most formal. The New Zealand Clan MacLeod Society ten years ago had an international gathering. They wanted as part of it, to have a competition, a Silver Fern competition which they modelled on the Silver Chanter. I was there as liaison in Scotland. They asked me to act as the Fear an Taigh, so I introduced all the pipers and all the tunes there. They wanted a Scot to come out and play and got Ewen to come and play. He and I did a couple of workshops in New Zealand associated with this. I talked, I explained, he played and we discussed. I'd say I had introduced this competition and he competed in it. That was a very enjoyable thing to do. We had done one or two things as well. We did a thing for Clan MacLeod Parliament in Skye about four years ago.

This would be another line of career if you like, from back in the 1960's when you were going to Skye. Your own playing and then there's the involvement with the Clan MacLeod as well as other things.

Yes that's right and that has produced something in the world of piping as well.

You're still doing so as well, as you say, deeply involved. What's your current involvement, a brief description if you like?

In piping, I suppose the main thing I am involved in piping wise nowadays is the Glasgow Highland Club, of which I

was pipe-major of a few years ago and for fifteen years I ran their schools competition, so I was deeply involved in that and since then I have been involved in helping to judge in their schools competition. But apart from my own private playing, my regular playing is with the Glasgow Highland Club and as I said, I am involved in the greater piping world with that. I still go and listen to competitions occasionally. I am teaching a middle aged lady in our village at the moment. I suppose the kinds of the things that I am doing...I am interested in teaching, I am interested in communication information and ideas and I suppose enthusiasm about piping really and that's what I actually do quite a lot of.

Which does show again that a third line which has come from your very early days in the 1960's, is teaching.

Yes.

So you have your own playing and your competition involvement through to the piping world, the Clan MacLeod's, competitions etc. Then judging, to the teaching of the actual instrument. Because earlier you indicated you had fun with the pupils you had in the schools, but in actual fact it has come to be something formal.

Yes. I suppose you could say that yes. [Laughter]

Going back to your own playing in those early days when you would pick up a tune. How would you go about that and the process would be hearing a tune, maybe on a record. How would you get to hear a tune, how would you then learn that tune? Would you have to go and find, if it was the 60's and 70's, would you

have to go and find the sheet music? How would you have gone about it?

How did I go about it? We had an old Logan's book from school. There were probably some tunes there. I don't know when I bought the old Scots Guards' Book, but obviously I had that for a long long time. It's now fallen apart, so I must have got that early on. I had a Seaforths book, and again when I was at school the school band was attached to the Seaforths. A lot of the tunes I had wanted to play would have been in one or other of those. Slow airs I just picked up and played wrongly as the song was the sung, rather than necessary as it would be on the pipes. I bought occasional books. I didn't get much sheet music as such. I remember I wanted to play Dr Ross and I went off and bought the Donald MacLeod that Dr Ross appears in, so that I had the music. When John MacFadyen produced his book there were tunes in that that I wanted. I can't think of the one that I particularly bought that for. I remember getting that. I played quite a few tunes out of that book. So that was what I did.

I only mentioned sheet music rather than books just because I know that in the 60's and 70's it was easier to get hold of sheet music from music shops. Did you hear the tune from records?

I would hear from all sorts of ways. I might hear them being played. I would say to my brother who would played a tune "I liked that tune, what was it?" That's probably how I heard Dr Ross. "I must get a hold of that." I remember a cousin of mine playing Castle Dangerous; he was a schoolboy then and I would say what a nice tune it was. I didn't get the music then, but I got it years and years later. I always thought that I must one day look for the music for Castle Dangerous as it was just a nice simple piece. I would hear people play. I listened to the piping

programme on Radio Scotland a lot. I listened to records. I went to competitions and recitals and so you would hear things. Sometimes you'd think that's a lovely tune and wondered if you could play that. You'd look at the music and think no I can't play that. [Laughter]. That's what the expert does. You make something complex and terribly simple.

Indeed, absolutely. But that does strike me as something that can happen between hearing something which as you said can seem to be simple, whereas quite complex and how it's transcribed on to sheet music or book form. Did you ever stumble at that point when you're listening to something and it's written down, and you think that that transcription is not right, it's incorrect? I need to fix this or something.

I sometimes think that...Funnily enough I was marginally involved in the production of the Piping Centre's very good instruction book because I am very friendly with Willie Morrison, who was working here at the time. I would get reeds off Willie and had occasional lessons off him as well. But he would say "there's this lovely tune, do you know anything about this tune Oh Gin I were a Baron' Heir? I would reply "oh yes I sing it, I know the words". He said he would to have the words. I think in your instructions, the first verse in that book are there. I know that I certainly talked to Willie and gave him a copy of the words. I was doing this with my pupil not so long ago and of course I was teaching her, talking and listening to her, playing the tune and said "oh no, it's not written as I play it".

This is what I meant.

You think I would play it differently, but if I am teaching her, I have to teach her the way that it's written, because

that's what she's got. But then we were doing the Dream Valley of Glendaruel* the other day, and I played it away and thought well no, again it's the same thing. It doesn't worry me, but I know there are all sorts of different settings, but if I am teaching her and this is the music I've given her, she's got to learn it like this, rather than the way I would play it.

Obviously because she has to then take it away and practice. So when you were learning to play did you stumble across any of those issues, so that when you're picking something up and you had maybe heard it rather than have a record of it back in the '70s. Did you ever find that the transcription wasn't quite what you had expected and how did you get over that stumbling block?

I suppose the answer is yes. I know there are two ways of playing the Scotland the Brave isn't there? So that's an obvious one. You say to piping acquaintances, "Right we'll play what do we know," and then of course you find you're playing marginally differently and you either agree to play it this way, the setting doesn't matter whether it's yours or theirs, or you think you'll do something else. Or you don't worry, well I don't worry, I like the way I'm playing it. I originally learnt from Mary MacLeod the normal standard setting as in the Kilberry book. Eventually we did this with the Glasgow Highland Club. We did Mary MacLeod and John Wilson who was our Club Piper and who teaches us these tunes said "Right, we're going to play the John MacDonald setting." I thought what a menace to have to re learn, or rather unlearn and then re-learn several phrases, but listening to it I thought, "That is a more attractive setting." I liked that setting better. I haven't played the Kilberry setting for years and years.

What I was leading up to was how you might have developed your own particular approaches to playing, when you're in the South of England or Wales and there's not really that much of a community around about, as there is in Glasgow?

Yes absolutely. I suppose the answer is I wouldn't mind. I would decide how I was going to play it, which is either how I'd learnt it or how I'd heard it and enjoyed doing it. If I played with someone else, which did happen from time to time, then obviously we'd have to agree how we'd play it. I don't think it mattered after all really. It only matters if you're playing in a band, or if you're competing and someone's going to object to your setting.

Sure, you're still being invited at that time to play and there wouldn't be anybody mentioning.

Well, the chances were...Well the majority of people who I would be playing before might enjoy pipe music, they might know some pipe tunes and some obviously did, but an awful lot of them wouldn't have a clue. They'd recognise the tunes.

So your own particular approach was just absolutely fine. There was a period when you came back to Glasgow to teach, in your day job that is, and renew your association with others in the piping community. You said yourself you picked up the piobaireachd, so it has affected how and has had an impact on your approach to playing.

Yes.

Looking back did you see anything particular that you think was certainly a milestone for you? Or was it one journey?

No it wasn't a smooth path really. I suppose getting a set of pipes was a very low level milestone. But that was a milestone and it kept me happy for a long time I think. Finding Kenny and getting instructed by him and realising that

- a) my pipes were jolly good pipes anyway and
- b) that I could play with work and practice better.

Playing piobaireachd really is a thing I have enjoyed most. But then that means I enjoy playing far more stuff. I played an odd reel; I hardly played any jigs or hornpipes. I enjoyed playing jigs and hornpipes nowadays. I don't necessarily play them very well, but I play them well enough to give me satisfaction and to play them in public.

What do you enjoy playing now?

I enjoy playing jigs and hornpipes. I enjoy playing 6/8s and slow airs and piobaireachd. Of course there are other tunes you know. If I play a march, strathspey and reel to my satisfaction, I enjoy that.

Have there been any other creative collaborations? I know there was a piper that played in a punk band. Is there anything that you've joined in with that would be an unusual combination?

Well the unusual combinations I used to join in, I drowned them out, because there was no loud speakers. [Laughter]. I used to play when I was at University. My college played village cricket and I used to take my pipes and a chap called Steve Richards, who later on played rugby for England for a short while, took his guitar and we did duets in these pubs where we ended up after having played a cricket match. [Laughter] So that was I suppose was the most unusual, but nowadays I am quite wary of playing. I

played with an old man on a saw. That was one of the best actually. This was at a wedding at one of my cousins on Skye, and he was marrying a Swedish girl. Her grandfather was an old rogue, but a charming and delightful man. He had a fiddle case, out of which he produced a saw and we played together. That was the best instrument because somehow the sound of the saw absolutely came clearly through the sound of the pipes, and was remarkably well balanced. That was the only time I did that. I have never seen him since. (Laughter).

TO I am coming to a close now, there's not much more I can think of or investigating. I probably could do on many or other occasions, but thank you very much. It was a pleasure hearing your story.

JDK That's a pleasure. I've enjoyed it. Piping is a marvellous thing and it's certainly taken me to places that I would never have gone to and given me good fun and companionship and so on. I love music.

TO Thank you very much. This is Terry O'Neill Noting the Tradition, 24th April 2013, concluding the interview with Mr John Davidson Kelly.