



NOTING THE TRADITION
An Oral History Project from the National Piping Centre



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Murray, it's now nearly forty years since you came over from New Zealand to Scotland, so I'm keen to talk about your career over this period and also developments that you've seen. But first could you tell us a little about the tuition you received in your early days in New Zealand?

Yes Howard. I was taught by my father initially. He was a player in the local pipe band in Timaru. I really just happened into piping, it wasn't something that I decided that I would do. My parents were farming in New Zealand at the time and living in rural New Zealand it was quite isolated from the rest of the world and hearing my father playing regularly of an evening it was just something that you thought that probably everyone did. So I just happened to just gradually get into piping that way.

My sister was learning at that time and she would be off at school and I would be at home and pick up the practice chanter and really just tootle on it and then my father would show me little pieces of the scale and I would just start and have my sister help me a little bit because I didn't really learn to read music for a year or so, so when it came to having lessons with my father I'd always done my homework and had my sister prepare me so that I could sit with the music in front of me and pretend to be watching it, but really just busking it and playing by ear.

So my father was my first tutor, so like I say, I was probably about four when I actually started and then he taught me up until age eight when he took me to one of New Zealand's foremost pipers Donald Bain. That's a name that will be familiar to the pipers the world over because Donald came to Scotland in 1967 or 1968 and competed very successfully, winning March and Strathspey and Reel at Inverness and Northern Meeting, and came back for many years and subsequently got the Gold Medal at Inverness.

So I was lucky to get tuition from Donald, generally about once a month because he lived fifty or sixty miles away from where we did near Timaru, so it was quite a journey to make that trip on a more regular basis than about once a month. So Donald was a huge influence on my piping career

from age eight right through until I left New Zealand at age twenty. I was lucky to have that class of tuition.

And with your father being a piper, does that point to a tradition for piping in the family?

Well, my father is the only piper in the family that we know of. His father had emigrated from Caithness out to New Zealand. So whether there had been other pipers along the way, we don't know.

But he started you off?

Yes. I should also talk about the other New Zealand influence. When Donald Bain came to Scotland in 1967 for the two year trip he suggested that I should further my tuition with a gentleman called Dave Boyle. His brother Bill was a very famous piper in New Zealand and in Scotland when he was over competing. So the two year period that Donald was in Scotland I continued lessons with Dave Boyle, who again just really followed the same top work that Donald had done with me.

Can you tell us a little about the piping scene in Timaru? Were you playing in bands at all or was it solo piping you were concentrating on even in those days?

Yes. I've never ever played in a pipe band in my entire career, and that wasn't really a conscious decision. The fact that we were living twenty-five miles from Timaru at that time my father had stopped playing in the pipe band, farming commitments, lambing, harvest, etc, made it pretty difficult to make the practices. So he'd stopped playing in the band and I was just coming along as a soloist.

The scene in New Zealand was extremely healthy at that time because I've covered Donald Bain, but there were also other top players, the likes of Allan Dodd and Lewis Turrell who had competed very successfully in the late fifties, early sixties, in Scotland. Lewis was the first non-Scot to win the Highland Society of London's Gold Medal in Inverness in 1958. Allan Dodd that same year won, I think both the Marches and the Strathspeys and Reels. But they were players of the highest calibre.

You had Bill Boyle who was able to hold his own in worldwide company. You had Bill Cruikshanks who had emigrated to New Zealand from Aberdeen and he was another international class player, as well as lots of very strong New Zealand players that hadn't competed outside of New Zealand. So the scene in New Zealand was extremely healthy at that time. The opportunity was there to go to the competitions and listen to world class pipers on your back door.

Fantastic. And when you thought about moving or coming over to Scotland, how much of it was piping and how much of it was like a number of young New Zealanders who think about travelling a bit and seeing the world?

It was primarily piping [laughter]. Also the thought of coming back to see where the grandfather had left from. But I didn't really have any designs on going to Europe it was solely for the piping.

What particular aspects would you say of the piping scene in Scotland, was it the competitions or the people that could help you continue to develop?

Yes. It was the development aspect that I really was keen to pursue. Obviously being able to compete in Scotland was a bonus. But it was really to follow through with the tuition that I'd been getting, and when Donald came back to New Zealand in 1968 he painted the scene of what it was like over here and how good it was, how strong it was and the opportunities to learn and seek knowledge.

With Donald's strong links with Scotland did that provide you with contacts which helped you find your feet and get established when you came over?

Yes. Well, I found that as soon as I got over here and people knew that I was from New Zealand they instantly asked about Donald, because it was just a couple of years on, it was, well I arrived in Scotland in February 1973, so Donald had only really been away for three years, his memory was still very fresh, he was keeping in touch with some of the pipers. So it was a great opening for me to come in.

When you came over did Scotland live up to the expectations and hopes that you possibly had for the place at that time?

Totally. Even more so. You can hear about the good players, the competitions, the whole scene, but it's one thing hearing about it and it's another thing actually witnessing it and being part of it. It's a fantastic opportunity for any person coming.

Who were the people, the individuals you went to to help you further develop your piping?

Because of my farming background I was keen to pursue the farming life in Scotland. And to enable me to get off to the competitions it was easier to go onto an agricultural farm than a stock farm. So the person that I was keen to go to in Scotland was Bob Nicol up at Balmoral. So I ended working on a farm just on the outskirts of Dundee and there was a Brown-Nicol pupil by the name of Jimmy MacIntosh that lived in Dundee, so I hooked up and had pretty much weekly tuition from him and then went up to Bob Nicol once a month to polish the material that I'd been working on.

And photos of you back in the mid 1970's show you as a young man, longish hair, and you looked I would say more like a rock musician than an army piper. How did the more conservative members of the piping scene react to you?

[Laughter] well, that wasn't a problem at all. When I did come to Scotland I did have a fairly traditional Kiwi short, back and sides, as it's called out there. But it was the seventies and it was the style for young men to have longish hair, so that didn't hold me back at all. There was one incident when I won the Gold Medal at Inverness in 1975, Colonel Jock McDonald, the late Colonel Jock McDonald presented me with my Gold Medal and when I went up and received the medal and the envelope the audience heard a roar of laughter, well when Colonel Jock presented the medal to me he said "I hope the prize money will be enough for a haircut." But he was saying it in jest obviously.

And you'd won the gold.

Yes.

So you arrived in Scotland in 1973. Gold Medal at Inverness in 1975. You must have been pleased with that success, fulfillment of a long held dream?

Well, yes. I'm hesitating with my reply on that one. In terms of all I wanted to do throughout my piping career was to become a better piper and I didn't set goals or I must try and win this, I must try and win that. So it wasn't so much a dream come true to win the gold medal, it was I suppose just a realisation that perhaps I was becoming a bit better at what I was doing and it's certainly an endorsement of your piping ability, but it wasn't one of these targets that that I said, well I must try and win this and I must try and win that. I've always taken the approach just to try and be as good as I possibly can, and if you pick up prizes along the way then it is a fantastic bonus, but that's all that it is, it's a bonus.

So your reaction wasn't, got the gold, now I can go home, and more a boost to your confidence and a vindication that?

It really is just the fact that you then get to play with the big boys, so to speak [laughter]. Because the Gold Medal does open the doors for the Bratach, the Silver Chanter, the Clasp, the Open at Oban, the premier events.

So a step to that higher level?

Yes. The Glenfiddich Championship. It really doesn't begin until you've won the Gold.

So it's not like the Olympics; that's not the absolute culmination that is as you say, your ticket into the premier league, the top flight?

Yes. Yes.

I don't want to concentrate over much on the competitions, but how long was it thereafter before you won the Clasp at Inverness?

Very fortunate in fact. I won the Clasp the following year in 1976. I won the Clasp for the first time. Wow! Because you're competing against all the great players of the day, and again you're not thinking, well, I must try and win the Clasp, you're thinking, well, I must try and put on the best show that I can so that I don't look out of place along with the great players. So it was really quite something just to win it the following year.

Can you remember the tune you played?

Yes I can. I played 'the Lament for the Earl of Antrim.'

And previously when you won the Gold what tune did you play then?

I won the Gold Medal with a tune called 'Fair Honey,' which was a tune that I'd learnt from the set list that year.

Is it not as well known as a tune? 'The Earl of Antrim' I know.

Yes. Any player worth his salt would recognise 'The Lament for the Earl of Antrim.' 'Fair Honey' is a tune that it has been set from time to time over the years, but it tends to be a tune that pipers play when it's set. It's not the most stunning piece that going in the Pibroch repertoire. So it's a tune that I probably have only played maybe a couple of times since I won the Gold Medal.

All right. It worked for you that year.

That's right [laughter],

Talking generally about competing pipers. Different pipers will have their own way of preparing each year for the competitions. How did you go about learning the set tunes for Oban and Inverness each year?

I was always very keen to get the tunes memorised before Christmas. So at that time, we're talking the mid seventies, the set tunes weren't announced generally until the Inverness was finished. Whereas now they announce them eighteen months in advance. But back then you went to Inverness and if you were lucky you learnt what the next year's set tunes

were going to be, the Pibroch Society sometimes made an announcement at Inverness what the tunes were going to be. So it would be down the road, books out and get the tunes memorised and tucked away by Christmas time. And then really just trying to hone them and perfect them over the winter months and then hit the ground running at the games, take them out, give them an outing, see what you could learn on the competition platform with them. And repetition.

You mentioned earlier that Bob Nicol for example, was someone you were going to, did you see him? Did he give you pointers? Was that part of your preparation?

Yes. Oh yes. Absolutely. As soon as you had the tunes memorised then he would take me through them. He was a very strict instructor.

At that time, and I'm thinking mid-seventies and after, a number of outstanding players on the scene Ceol Beag and piobaireachd, were there any players that you particularly admired or learning from?

Pretty much all of them [laughter]. There were so many good players on the scene that were just world names and there was so much that you could learn from listening to all of them, so many individual styles, not only in terms of the music, also the instruments as well, some fantastic sounds.

I'm thinking did you overlap with the likes of J.D Burgess? Donald MacPherson? Hugh MacCallum?

Yes. Absolutely. And Pipe Major Angus MacDonald, Iain Morrison, the MacFadyen brothers, John McDougall. The problem is when you start mentioning names the danger is that you missed some out because there really were so many good players at the time. Ian MacLellan, who just played light music, Hugh MacInnes. Gavin Stoddart wasn't competing as much at the time because of his army duties, he came on the scene just a little bit later, but he had been on the scene before I arrived and then came back to it. Locking horns with Tom Speirs around the games. Really just outstanding players.

Yes. Yes. And you subsequently had a great record of success. I think five or six Clasps to your Gold at Inverness, the Open at Oban, five Silver Chanters at Dunvegan, Bratach Gorm five times I think. I could go on. But how did you manage to maintain such a high level of success for such a long period of time?

Discipline, probably is the word that springs to mind. I've just had so much fun from piping over a lifetime and just one year tended to lend itself gradually into the next one and the next one, and you never thought, gee [laughter] how do you keep this going? If you enjoy doing something it's just so satisfying to do it. Back at that period when there were so many top established players if you wanted to front it you had to put the work in, and then all of a sudden the next generation started coming along and if you wanted to try and keep in the swim, again you had to keep the work going, and then another generation would come along as well. So it's just constantly trying to improve your game I suppose.

And maintain the standards.

Yes. Yes.

I'm possibly asking the wrong person here, but in the past there's been criticism that some judges didn't know enough about piping, or piobaireachd in particular to be judging, possibly not Oban and Inverness. But is that something you encountered at all?

When I first came to Scotland you had people that had quite recently retired. I'm thinking the likes of John MacLellan, John MacFadyen,* Seamus MacNeill, Donald MacLeod, who had obviously retired a little bit before those three gentlemen. So you had a basis of very active tutors and people that had been successful. Then you had your James Campbell's, Frank Richardson's, Archie Kenneth's. It's people like that that perhaps were more known for their scholarly approach and all the work that they'd done with the canntaireachd, putting it onto the score. So when I came and those days that you're perhaps referring to had basically gone, certainly at the main competitions, and Ronnie MacCallum was another that was judging at the time, people that were very well qualified to sit in judgment.

And judges who themselves had played and competed at a higher level.

Yes. D R McLennan was another one that was judging a lot.

I think eventually you decided on a lay off, I think about 1995 or thereabouts?

Yes. That's right. After Inverness 1995, I'd won the Clasp again that year, and the fun had gone out of it a little bit. I was starting to feel a little bit jaded and I took six years away from competing. And really just happened back into competing again through sheer chance. Roddy McLeod had asked myself and Ian MacFadyen to perform a recital at the National Piping Centre, that was probably 2001 I think, and while I hadn't been competing I'd still been playing regularly, but not preparing the way that I had been used to for competing. So the fact that I was doing a recital with Ian MacFadyen and it was mainstream Glasgow, the pressure was on to front, and I just enjoyed so much preparing for that and I thought, oh, I might just have another wee tune.

So you had a lay off from competing but you were still playing during this lay off?

Well yes. My business dictates that I will be playing on a regular basis anyway, testing chanters and pipes and reeds, but it's nothing like out in the public domain when the pressure's on.

Murray, I'm conscious that I possibly fast forwarded twenty years to 1995 in your lay off, because I realise that you spent some time in the States, I think in the first part of the eighties, was that a lay off or were you playing and competing then in North America?

Yes. Patricia and I went to America in 1982 and we lived there for three years. We were both competing in America and a little bit in Canada as well, but also coming back for Skye, Oban and Inverness. So whilst we weren't living here we were very involved, again if you want to front it's got to be in Scotland, this is where everything is measured as far as I'm concerned, so we wanted to continue our link and get back each year to compete.

Also I should add when we came back from America in 1985 I went to Pipe Major James MacGregor who was living down in Blairgowrie, so I had weekly lessons from Big Jimmy over two or three years and he really gave me another insight in the approach to both piobaireachd and light music and that was a very rewarding experience also.

A question. So here we go. I'd like to ask Murray, about your wider piping related activities, but if you'd stayed in New Zealand do you think you could have made a living out of piping in the same way you've done?

Absolutely not. No. It wouldn't have been an option. There are a couple of piping positions now in New Zealand. Richard Hawke has one at St Andrew's College in Christchurch, he teaches the school band. Alistair McKenzie the Scottish lad, he's out in Invercargill on a paid position. But they are quite recent events that have happened and certainly back in the day when I left New Zealand it just wasn't an option to be a full-time piper.

So farming would have been?

Yes. Yes. I would have been sheering sheep [laughter].

So what led you into full-time reed making? I think from the mid-seventies onwards.

In 1976 I became a full-time reed maker and it was really just something that I happened into. Really just a hobby that took over, working on the farm all day and then making reeds most nights just became a bit too much, so I made the conscious decision in 1976 to go full-time as a reed maker.

And chanter design is something that you also have been involved in. How did that come about?

Yes. I've had two rounds at that. The first was in 1977 when Les Cowell who owned David Naill & Company, approached myself and Jimmy MacIntosh to ask us if we would be interested in selling Naill Bagpipes.

So he sent John Roe the ex-Scots Guardsman, up to visit us with two sets of bagpipes. We were pretty happy with the drones that they were producing but the chanter really wasn't at the standard that would have been acceptable at the level that we were looking for. So we related this to Les and he invited us down to design a chanter, and we went down and within a couple of days we'd settled on the specs that we wanted and it went on to pretty much become an instant success.

The second bit of the cherry, so to speak, was something that really developed from that in terms of in 2004 I designed my own complete instrument, drones and chanter, the 'Strathmore' by name. So again back to the drawing board and a complete redesign on that front.

Has it been difficult at times balancing the business side, designing and reed making, with your actual playing and piping?

You've just got to be good at juggling [laughter]. The days get longer and the time gets very precious. But it's allocation of time and time management.

Not all musicians are necessarily good businessmen or like the business side. What have been the pluses and minuses for you being involved in the business side of piping?

Well, it teaches you very much that if you're doing it seriously you do have to have your business hat on when you're dealing with the business side of it. It was a bit of a steep learning curve because coming from a farming background you got out and you were doing hard, physical work. Then taking on the piping side you were learning tunes and making music, then when you are reliant on reeds and instruments to pay the mortgage it means that you do have to learn the business side very quickly to make sure that everything adds up.

But a lot of good help from my wife Patricia, she was very good at typing, she went through all the classes and everything when she was doing her education, so she was way ahead of the game when it came to typing up invoices and now of course doing it on the computer and everything. So she was two steps ahead of me, so yes, that was a big help.

So Strathmore Bagpipes is very much a partnership for you and Patricia?

Absolutely. Totally. Yes.

Teaching is something that you also do. Light music, Pibroch, or both?

Yes. Yes. Both. Yes. I've taught it to quite a lot of schools around the world, and also private tuition and I'm doing some Skype work now as well, which is taking it on to the next stage. I find teaching very rewarding and have been lucky enough to have helped several players win gold medals at the likes of Oban and Inverness. I'm thinking of four or five students that I've helped to win gold medals. One of them our daughter Faye, well, I suppose I've been half a teacher for Faye, Patricia had done the other half so it's been a team effort with Faye. The likes of Greg Wilson.

Well known New Zealand piper.

Yes. Greg is well known internationally. Also with his work at the National Piping Centre. But there's someone that I've helped and he's gone on to win several Clasps at the Northern Meeting at Inverness, and it's extremely rewarding when you're competing against pupils. The big challenge really is to make them better than you. If you do that I think as a tutor then you have succeeded.

Yes. How would you describe yourself as a teacher?

[Laughter] well, you'd better not ask the pupils [laughter].

I was going to ask you as well, how would they describe you?

I'm thinking that they probably feel that I'm pretty strict, and I make no apologies for that, it's the style that I have been taught all my life.

Strict in terms of knowing the tunes, practice?

Yes. Discipline. Come for your lesson prepared. You don't come to the lesson to practice; you come to the lesson to improve, to polish. So I expect my pupils to come prepared and I say that at any level that they're at, it's not every piper that has the ability or the time or wants to compete in the Clasp at Inverness, for instance. So I think as a tutor you try to establish where the player feels they sit and then try and tie that in with how you think that it sits with you.

Sometimes you can encourage them to become much better than they feel that they can be. So it's a case of I think, identifying the ladder that the pupil wants to be on and is capable of being on, so you work them accordingly. I always like to think that no matter what level a player is at you can always help them and the better you can make them at whatever level they are, the more fun they will get out of piping, because the bottom line is it's got to be fun, it's got to be enjoyable, otherwise it's not worth doing.

And Skype makes distance learning possible as it has been in the past, but do you feel it's any less important for overseas pipers to come over to Scotland and immerse themselves, or do they still need to get in at the deep end?

Skype is great because it take you to the over side of the world or the other end of the country so easily. But there is no substitute for face-to-face lessons and there's no substitute for getting experience in the piping scene. But what it does is allow students the world over to get very good tuition on a regular basis at an affordable price.

Can we turn to recording your CD on the World's Greatest Pipers series as perhaps your more widely available recording. Could you tell us how you went about deciding what tunes to put on that recording?

Piobaireachd wise I was keen to put something down that I really hadn't heard recorded before. It's nice to hear the classics but sometimes it's nice to hear someone playing something that's a little bit more obscure.

This is The Cave of Gold?

Yes it is. Yes. Which we think is a MacCrimmon composition. I first happened on the tune when I was out judging and teaching in South Africa. A competitor at the 100 Guineas competition in Johannesburg presented his three tunes and one of them was The Cave of Gold, the competitor was the Reverend Cecil Tee, and I hadn't met Cecil before, didn't know his history and certainly had never heard of The Cave of Gold before, and I'm thinking okay, as judge should I be giving this tune and the obvious answer was no, so I didn't. But we went on and discussed it subsequently and he had learnt it from Bob Brown when he was out in South Africa on one of his teaching stints, and he had a recording with Bob Brown playing it. So I thought, okay I must put that in the repertoire, so it was not long after that I was asked to record the World's Greatest Series, so I just thought it would be a nice one to add on there.

You say a MacCrimmon tune, Donald Mor MacCrimmon or is it known exactly who composed it?

I think it is actually Donald Mor. Yes. But it's in G.F Ross's collection of music, and it's currently not on the list for Skye, it has been on the list from time to time. So it's one of these ones that they're just not too sure of.

And as often piobaireachds have a myth or a story behind them, is there a story behind The Cave of Gold?

I'm sorry. I can't help you out with that one Howard.

I did a little bit of research myself and the story I read was that a piper on Skye meets a young maiden, she gives him a silver chanter with magical powers and it guarantees the piper's success, but after a year and a day he must go to the cave of gold from which he never returns.

Really? Well, I'm very pleased that you've come to interview me today, there's something that I've learnt.

What struck me and it may be a bit notional, is I wondered if you saw any links between that story and your own piping career?

[Laughter] well, it's a very good story anyway, isn't it?

If you were recording another CD these days, how would you approach it in terms of choice of tune or how you wanted to present your playing?

I'd probably look at some of the classics. I might be tempted to do something from the Donald MacDonald line. We've had exposure over the last year with the Donald MacDonald requirement at Oban and Inverness, and it's quite interesting looking at some of those settings and just wondering what there is there that one can develop.

Any plans to do another recording?

No. There's nothing in the pipeline at the minute. It is something that I will probably try and pursue over the next three or four years. Another tune, I was invited last year to the John MacLellan recital competition, and each of the four players were given one of John's tunes and the tune I was given was the Edinburgh Piobaireachd, and I really enjoyed learning that for the event. Some of the modern tunes that aren't getting exposure that are capable I think, of holding their own in any level of competition, certainly the Edinburgh Piobaireachd is one that I would class in that category.

That recital/competition I think was in Edinburgh, and I think held for the first time last year. Is that likely to become an annual event?

I'm not sure if they'll be having it annually or not. They certainly, as I understand, intend to have it regularly and possibly annually if they can.

So it would be a good showcase for those compositions that aren't perhaps as widely known?

Absolutely. I thought that's an event that was quite stunning. But it was very relaxing having it as a dinner and then the players coming on after that. I thought it worked extremely well.

If we look at other developments in piping what would you see as some of the bigger developments in piping over the last ten, twenty, thirty years?

I think the biggest development has obviously been the move away from cane drone reeds and skin pipe bags. I'm not saying that it's necessarily been for the best. I think overall it has allowed a much higher standard of instrument from the piping mass. When I think back to the sounds that the best players had back in the seventies and the eighties, you'd be hard pressed to beat that with any formula. But what the synthetic bags and reeds have done is make it a much more level of playing field in terms of the skill back in the day was to have everything to its optimum on the competition platform, where it is much easier now for everyone to have steady drones, moisture controls, etc. So that's got to be a big plus in general terms, so long as it doesn't get confused with replacing something that was I think very special.

So what were you playing, say in the mid-seventies, eighties?

All cane and sheepskin bag.

And roughly when did you make the transition to, or did you make the transition to some of the more modern ...?

Yes. I went onto a Canmore bag probably I suppose when the Canmore bags first came out and I'm thinking that was probably about the mid-eighties. And synthetic drone reeds 1986, 1987. Although I still do sometimes play cane, when I won my Clasp with the Harp Tree in 2006 I was playing all cane that day. It's a fantastic feeling to have cane and have it go well.

If I can switch to the way music's possibly changed. I'm thinking that in the seventies the traditional music scene in Ireland was undergoing a bit of a revival with Irish tunes in turn beginning to creep into band medleys over here and some of the Scots bagpipe players increasingly playing Irish tunes. Did that have an influence on you at all, the folk side and crossover of tunes?

No. I've lived a bit of a sheltered life [laughter]. I think because I've never played in a pipe band I've just stuck to the traditional Scottish repertoire. I get a lot of enjoyment out of listening to that influence though.

And I'm thinking an Irish piper, Paddy Keenan of Bothy Band fame, I think had an influence on the likes of say, Gordon Duncan and his playing, and having an influence on some of the younger Scots pipers. So if I can use the term 'more contemporary player' or 'more contemporary compositions.' How do you view that evolution in the music?

I'm very happy to listen to it.

In some quarters there's been a hostile reaction, and I'm thinking several decades ago and a well known man with opinions. You listen to it. It's good to listen.

[Laughter] I don't have a problem at all. I enjoy that side of what pipers do. I personally just don't have the time to go down that route or I haven't been prepared to make the time to go down that route. I don't like all of it, but I'm pretty broadminded when it comes to that stuff because if it sets your foot tapping and you can sing and whistle to it subsequently, well then it's got to be doing some good I think.

Focusing then on piobaireachd. At times there's a lot of debate, disagreement about aspects of piobaireachd and I'm thinking of some of the criticism made of Kilberry in the past, possibly for inaccuracies, or criticism of the Piobaireachd Society, too dogmatic dictating the approved version of a tune. Without creating any controversy here, any views on the different debates and controversies that you've seen at times in piobaireachd?

I just wish people would get on with it. I think we've certainly moved into a period where most people are pretty open-minded actually when it comes to the bit. It's easy to sit back and criticise certain factions, should be doing this, should be doing that, but everyone's doing their bit for what they think is the betterment of the piobaireachd movement. I've been involved in a couple of things that perhaps some purists wouldn't be all

that keen on and that is group piobaireachd play, which again just happened by sheer chance.

I was asked seven years ago to teach out at the Mastery of Scottish Arts out in Seattle, which is an event that's run by the Celtic Arts Foundation out in Seattle and they have a concert plus a series of workshop tuition days that follow piping, fiddling, drumming. So the big concert in Benaroya Hall the instructors were all asked to stand and do a wee solo spot. The first year that I went we had the likes of Roddy MacLeod, Willie McCallum, Jack Lee, Alasdair Gillies, Bruce Gandy, I'm not sure whether Stuart Liddell was there that year or not, but pipers of that ilk along with drummers of the same calibre.

I was asked to play a solo piobaireachd at the concert, so doing a little bit of research saying, well what's the audience? Well, it could be up to two thousand people, they're going to be North Americans, and I'm thinking this is probably the wrong audience to go and stand up and play Donald Ban, for instance [laughter]. So I said, well I'd be quite keen for piobaireachd to be represented but perhaps there might be a better way to do it. I suggested that I play a solo ground and then had the rest of the pipers join me and we would just play excerpts from a tune. So I actually choose Donald of Laggan and I played the ground, the rest of the pipers joined in, we went into taorluath singling straight into crunlauth doubling, so we were doing a little potted version, but it was giving exposure to a lot of piobaireachd. In fact it went down extremely well, so well that the next year they said, great piobaireachd number, just get it organised. So the next year I involved a bass and tenor drum and the taorluath singling for highlighting the cadence sections and brought in the snare line for the crunlauth variation and for seven years I've been doing that out there.

Now, the moment that you start to get a snare drummer, bass and tenor, plus group pipers playing piobaireachd, we probably don't have to go back many years to think there would be a lot of shaking of heads and wondering what was going on. Well, the upshot of that when Inveraray and District were asked to do a concert in Aberdeen recently, Stuart Liddell asked if I would come and lead them in a piobaireachd number. So I think we had nineteen pipers on stage and we performed the Donald MacDonald style setting of 'Too Long In This Condition' again edited highlights, and it went down extremely well and the members of the band

really enjoyed doing it. So maybe I'm a bit of a rebel myself [laughter] when it comes to this.

If piobaireachd is viewed as a minority taste, and even amongst pipers as a minority taste, do you feel this is something that can make piobaireachd more accessible?

I think so. Yes. Absolutely. I'm all for trying to sell it to a wider audience. If you take the Glenfiddich Championship out of the equation, the great hall there is always full, so fantastic audience for the Glenfiddich Championship. If you go to other piping events, competitions, if you get fifty or sixty in the audience that's pretty good, if you can get more than that's fantastic. Whereas I think the audience at the Music Hall in Aberdeen for the concert was about fifteen hundred people. So if you can do things that promote piobaireachd to a wider audience I think it can only be good for the subject.

The examples you've given show that people turn up, do you think the emphasis on competition rather than recital is right or should there be more emphasis on recital?

I think you need a balance of both. The solo piper cannot survive without competition, there simply aren't enough opportunities for recitals, there's not a wide enough platform. If you look at the numbers that you get applying for Oban and Inverness now, you'll possibly get two hundred people applying for a hundred spots at Oban and Inverness, the hundred that don't get in there are we going to get a hundred recital spots for them?

Yes. So a question of balance.

Yes.

Still focusing on competitions. A number of excellent and successful pipers moved away from the competitions. I'm thinking of Alan MacDonald as an example, Fred Morrison. When you were a competing piper did you feel constrained at all that you had to conform to a ruling orthodoxy of, perhaps that's too strong, or they had to conform to the expectations of the judges?

No. I didn't feel any need that I had to conform, because all the teaching that I've had through my lifetime has always had authority. I'm not saying it's the way that pipers since the 1700's have always played, because I think quite frankly no one knows. But we do know that certainly from tracing back from tutor to tutor to tutor we seem to be able to get a fair way back and still be along the same lines that we are now.

I think that sometimes perhaps the danger is we must always remember whether it be piobaireachd or light music, the idea is to be making music and it's not just to be a technical exercise. I just wonder if sometimes some people are a bit hung-up about the technical exercise first and foremost and not thinking about, well that should be a given, at the top level pipes and fingers should be given. It's what you do after that that is going to make you stand out.

Expression, interpretation.

Pulsing and phrasing. Shading. It's the only thing we have. For a piper I need to be different. For a piper to be it's got to be in the interpretation and I think there's enough scope there without going off on quite a different angle to be different.

Well, my objective wasn't to stir up controversy. We'll leave that to others and we'll let the players carry on playing. But if I could turn to another subject then, women and piping. Because there's parts of the piping establishment which some in the past have viewed a bit conservative, possibly a bit chauvinistic, in some quarters women not admitted as members, or a long while back, women not able to compete. Through piping you've become involved with a number of women, Murray I'm thinking of course about your wife, Patricia, your daughter that you mentioned, both pipers in their own right. When you think back to the time you and your wife were both competing, do you think women were getting a fair hearing then as competitors?

I think that was probably about the turn actually, the mid-seventies when legislation was passed and which meant that Oban and Inverness had to allow females to compete at the events.

Murray, sorry about the clock there. But you were saying that legislation in the seventies opened up Oban and Inverness to women and that was when things began to change.

Yes. I think so. When you look back now, how sad that females were debarred, really it's just unbelievable. I think possibly the fact that people were retiring at that period and going onto the judging meant that those former competitors were teaching females and actually seeing how quick they were as pupils. Generally speaking when you have two youngsters, a male and a female, the female tends to be the quickest on picking up the tuition.

I think from that time on it's been pretty even steven for them really. I can't really think of any on the solo scene that would be deemed to have been given a rough spin when it comes to equality. Certainly the way things have moved on now, with Faye winning the Gold Medal at Oban in 2010, that's probably rubber stamped the fact that yes, the females are just as good as the guys and there's certainly no reason why they're not looked upon in exactly the same way.

So would you see more women competing at these highest levels and winning at these highest levels?

I'm not sure whether we'll see more or not. It's always quite a difficult one really for the females because if they're juggling careers and families it's extremely difficult for them. I've got a lot of sympathy with the females. It's all right for the guys, they come home at night and they think it's their right to [laughter] get their pipes out and practice. But it's quite difficult for the females and it requires a lot of dedication from them, but they're certainly right up there and capable of holding their own at any level I think.

And do you think we'll see more women becoming judges?

I do. Yes I do. Because Patricia's on the joint committee of adjudicators. Rhona MacDonald is also on it, and I would imagine the females that are having quite a lot of success now, if they stop competing I imagine it will be a natural progression for them.

Through piping you would have met a great number of people over the years. Are there particular personalities, characters that you remember? That had a big effect on you? You've talked about tutors and I'm thinking that and more widely.

I mentioned quite a few of the names of the big stars that were on the go when I first arrived and I class all those in that category. And again I touched on some of them judging, D R McLennan he was a man of fantastic presence, and talking about G.S McLennan is his half brother it took you back. Angus MacPherson for instance, who was well into his nineties when he died and had been judging recently up until he died. So people like that. Bessie Brown, Bob Brown's sister, who was confined to a wheelchair for almost all her life and always sat at the games board in her wheelchair no matter what the weather was and she would talk about some of the great players that she knew from association with her brother, Bob. So I really feel extremely lucky in that I've heard so many good players competed against so many good players of different generations as well, and also had experience with the likes of your Angus MacPherson's who were earlier generations.

It's now nearly forty years since you came over from New Zealand. Did you think back in 1973 that forty years later you would have lived so long in Scotland and that was you making what's come to be quite a permanent move?

Well, when I left New Zealand I had a return ticket that had to be used within two years. Because I sailed to Scotland, five weeks on the ocean, and I cashed in the return ticket after my first season at the games, thinking no, I know that I'm not going to be ready to go back to New Zealand in two years. I didn't think that it was going to be forty years on and I'd still be here. But this is home, fantastic support from Patricia over my piping career, and also our two daughters, Faye, who the pipers know through her piping, but also our other daughter Fiona, who competed at the Glenfiddich Fiddle Championship on three occasions and played in 2010 the same year that Faye played in the piping event.

Faye played on the Saturday and Fiona on the Sunday, if I recall.

Yes. Right. So forty years on and two daughters competing at that level, one piping and one fiddling, and all the support from Patricia, which you can't do this over a forty year haul without tremendous family support. Not to mention the ongoing support from my family in New Zealand.

Well, when I was preparing for this interview I read that one of the themes underlying pìobaireachd stories like Cave of Gold is that there is no returning when one is totally committed to a dream. So I think that you've demonstrated that for us.

It looks a little bit like it, doesn't it?

So Murray, I'm grateful to you for taking the time today for telling us about your piping. I think you've been a wonderful ambassador for New Zealand and we in Scotland and the rest of the world have been very fortunate in having you over here. So thank you again.

Thanks very much Howard. Thank you.