



NOTING THE TRADITION
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Interviewee **Professor Roddy Cannon**

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This is James Beaton for ‘Noting the Tradition.’ I’m here in the National Piping Centre with Professor Roddy Cannon, piper, piping historian and researcher, and also professionally a scientist. It’s St Andrew’s Day 2012 and we’re going to be speaking really about Roddy’s life and times in piping. Roddy, good morning and welcome.

Good morning. Good morning. It’s always good to be back.

Well, it’s nice to see you here and it’s nice to have you back.

I come here on average about once a year these days. I give a number of classes and I talk to your students and I talk to the staff and I talk to you and it’s wonderful.

Well, it’s nice to have you here.

The thing that strikes me very much about your classes is that they’re so different from one year to the next. Some sit quietly and listen, some of them join the debate vigorously, and very occasionally I get confuted by counter arguments and that’s what I like best. I’ve always tried to encourage the students to argue and think for themselves.

Yes. Well, it’s good that they do that because I think that’s certainly something that we here at the Piping Centre and I think in the Conservatoire more widely in terms of the degree courses would probably want to do in terms of what we do with the Conservatoire students.

That’s what strikes me most forcibly when I come here. There was nothing of anything like this in my younger days and it’s conventional to say that sort of thing, but it’s true.

Well, indeed, and absolutely very much the same in my own younger days and it’s great that it’s here. But if I could just turn to yourself and your background in piping and so on.

Of course. Yes.

You grew up in England?

Yes. Certainly. Yes.

And piping in the family?

Yes. There's piping in the family. I'll begin at my beginning. Let me try and begin at the beginning. I was born in 1938 and I lived in a place called Eccles, which is a district to the west of Manchester. It's a run-down grimy old place: it's not quite as grimy now as it used to be, but it's even more run-down than it used to be I think. And my family had lived there for possibly a couple of generations, but if I look at my family tree they were all incomers from other parts. In those days the North of England was the place you went to make a living, and some of my forebears were farmers in East Anglia and they went to the North of England because they had to live and that was the way to do it. Economic migrants, that's what they were.

Economic migrants. So presumably there would be a lot of industry and things.

Oh absolutely. Yes. It's factories, engineering, railway lines, black smoke.

Yes. So out of that then how did the piping come about?

Well, in my family, it came on my father's side. My father had all the Scottish side of the family and my mother came from a totally different tradition which I now find very valuable and interesting to think about, but there's nothing Scottish or piping wise on my mother's side of the family. Let me think now. Now, my father he was called Charles, born 1902... sorry, so sorry, my apologies dad, he was called Malcolm [laughter], his father was called Charles, and his father would have been half Scottish, there were Macleans on one side and Cannons on the other. And my father's mother was also half Scottish, the Scottish side was called Sanderson and the other side, the name escaping me just for the moment, but anyway, two halves of the family were Scottish.

I've often thought about them. I never knew my grandfather who was the Scottish side grandfather in my father's family, but I do know a little bit about him and where he came from and so forth. I also know a little about my grandmother on that side, I never knew her either, and I've been told that my grandmother, they were both very, very conscious of their Scottish descent, it was very important to them, and my grandmother is said to have been a really powerful and good Scottish singer, knew all the standard songs. My father, who was very well educated in music, self-educated, but very well educated, would always qualify this and say "well, she was not a trained singer, you understand, she didn't have a trained voice, but she knew the stuff," and I think he inherited some of that from her.

My grandfather's, I'm getting this confused now, but never mind. The piping started in the family with my grandfather who was called Charles, he didn't play the pipes himself but it was part of his Scottish identity to do this, and I now know that what he was, he was an officer in the Boys' Brigade, the Boys' Brigade was a tremendously important institution of young boys at that time, we're talking about the very, very early 1900s. And my father Charles became an officer in one of the local BB companies and it was one of those sorts of things that men liked to do to encourage boys in the right way.

The BB Company at that time was playing the usual drums and bugles, and I always understood it was my grandfather who persuaded the BB authorities locally to go over to having a pipe band, and that's what they did. And also I understand, it was my grandfather who got the thing off the ground by organising tuition for some of the boys, and he found a Scottish piper in Manchester and I know a bit about him actually, his name was Donald Fraser, he'd been in the Seaforth Highlanders, he'd trained under Ronald MacKenzie, Pipe Major Ronald MacKenzie. That makes it sound very distinguished of course, when you get down to the level of a Boys' Brigade pipe band in 1907 it's not very distinguished and I wouldn't claim that it was, but nevertheless they got on and they played the pipes.

My grandfather had three sons; there was Kenneth, Angus and Malcolm. You can see from the names the way he was coming. All three of them were put to the pipe band in due course. Kenneth, the oldest, didn't take

much to piping or didn't continue with piping, but he did join the Army and did work his way up the ranks and finished off as an army officer in fact. So he made quite a career out of the Army at a time when it wasn't an easy thing to do.

No. No. No. And presumably not easy for people with a non-public school background to become an officer and things like that.

Absolutely not. In fact this was trouble in the family, when he finally made it to be an officer about the 1930s he changed his regiment, which is what almost inevitably you would have to do I think for that. He even changed his name, he adopted his middle name which was Maclean, in preference to Cannon, and my grandfather Cannon was not happy about this, I can understand that. But nevertheless, Major Kenneth Maclean was what he became, and I think in those days that was an almost inevitable career move for somebody in those, as you say, more difficult circumstances.

In those social circumstances. Yes.

The next brother was Angus, and I look back to him with much more direct influence. Although I remember him well and even remember him playing on the practice chanter, I never heard him play the pipes, for this reason, because he went into the First World War, he was a few years younger than Kenneth, he went into the War in 1914, he joined the Royal Scots Regiment, there's a Territorial battalion, the 9th Battalion Royal Scots, they called themselves the 'Dandy 9th.' And behind that there was also a story because when the First World War broke out there was quite a movement in the Manchester area to form a Manchester Scottish regiment, just as you had the London Scottish and a Liverpool Scottish, it would have been a territorial outfit, and there was a lot of Scottish interest in Manchester. It wasn't approved, I guess they didn't have enough young men for this, and the outcome was that large numbers of boys from, I believe from our area joined Scottish regiments, mostly either the Royal Scots or else the Gordon Highlanders. So I understand. I have all this from my father because this was a bit before my time.

But one of the outcomes was that Angus joined the Royal Scots as a piper, and in fact he was a piper already and it did him no harm at all. I have lots

of lovely photographs of him in his uniform along with his chums, as you would say in those days. So he went to France and played the pipes, and I even fairly recently contacted a very, very old soldier from the same regiment and he could actually remember marching to the pipes as the drafts of men marched up and down behind the lines, and Angus would have been one of the pipers at that time.

But Angus became ill and was sent back home and then he was called back again when the war was getting even more difficult and eventually he was wounded and came out of the war at the end of it. And he did not have a good life after that, his health suffered a lot, he became relatively disabled, although he could still play the pipes and did so for quite a long time. Whereas Kenneth had, if you like, a relatively good war, Angus had a relatively bad war and that was the way things were. But I have Angus's pipes and I still play them.

Oh right. Yes.

Yes. They're a fine sounding set. They're Henderson's, full size Henderson's. He bought them or his father bought them for him I believe second-hand from another piper that he'd traced in Manchester who had once been in the Gordon Highlanders, and sure enough when I got those pipes they were still dressed in Gordon tartan and Gordon ribbons, in fact I've still got the ribbons.

Yes. Excellent.

Okay. So that was Angus and he was an influence in an indirect way because I didn't start piping until after Angus had died. But my father who was a few years younger than either of these two boys, also took up the pipes with the Boys' Brigade, and he was the one who taught me to play, and I find it interesting now to look back at that because although the standard of piping was far from high, my father taught me from manuscripts which his brother Angus had written in the army, in his army days and had left with Malcolm. So we weren't taught from the Scots Guards book or even the Seaforth Highlanders book, we were taught from handwritten copies of tunes which had come out of the old Henderson, Logan and Glen tutors.

I think that there's a much overlooked tradition of pipers at that point handing manuscripts around amongst themselves, and I suspect there are all sorts of things because books would have probably been relatively expensive for people to buy, and there was a sort of trade in manuscripts being handed around.

Yes. You're absolutely right. I've written this bit before, but you can have it again, that in fact in the Boys' Brigade Band, which there were about six, nine or maybe even a dozen pipers at the most I should think, my grandfather provided all the written music for that first group of boys, and he did it by hand-copying from a few other manuscripts and books which he had at hand, and my older uncle Kenneth told me that he could remember he was as clear as day sitting at the kitchen table with a semi-circle of manuscript books in front of him writing the first line, the first line, the first line, writing the second line, the second line, the second line, all by hand beautiful, I've still got a couple of those books.

Yes. That's a labour of love really, isn't it?

And Kenneth said he did it as easy as if he was writing a letter. So Charles Cannon, that's my grandfather, didn't play the pipes but he became very knowledgeable at that level of piping and he could supervise boys' band practices and put the boys right.

So your father taught you, and that would be what, the 1940s?

No. I'm afraid it was later than that. I came to piping relatively late. I tried to think about it as I was preparing for this talk. I think it must have been about 1952 that I started practice chanter lessons with my father.

So you'd be a teenager at the time?

That's right. And I now see that as a little bit on the late side to be really starting the pipes if you're really going to make anything of it, but that was the way it was.

Yes. Indeed. But that was the way it was. Yes. When you were in the Boys' Brigade yourself was there much opportunity for you to play outwith the family setting?

Not a lot. No. We played every week and we even won a band contest locally in Manchester. There wasn't a lot of opposition, but we won [laughter].

But nonetheless. Yes.

And it was a good discipline. I look back on that time now as a time when the quality of piping was pretty dire I should imagine, but we were in fact doing it and even teaching the younger boys on the chanter for a short time. But I see myself now as having been pretty much self-taught, my father took me through various basics and I practiced hard under his tuition and even now I can recognise that when we get to the end of what he taught me personally from the chanter and I was back with the books, I am less confident as soon as I move off that original beaten track. There's nothing like being taught by somebody, being told by somebody what to do; it stays with you.

It does. Yes. Absolutely. So at this time presumably you were going through your education?

That's right. Well, of course the education got in the way of the piping and I guess the piping got in the way of the education [laughter].

Of the education, to an extent as well. Yes. So I suppose you'd be going through school and then off to university.

Yes.

Did you go to university locally or did you...?

No. I went to Oxford in fact. We were living in Manchester at the time and I got sent off. I was very lucky. Honestly, the opportunities that existed in those days, I see them as quite extraordinary compared with today. The chances of anyone... Only one person in my family had been to university before and that was my mother, she was a graduate from Manchester University, and nobody had even thought of Oxford and Cambridge until the Education Act came in and the elementary schools could send you to grammar schools and the grammar schools could send you to university. So I was very, very fortunate at that time I reckon.

Yes. And off to Oxford and much piping there?

Some piping. Some piping. Yes. A few of us, the enthusiasts, we even formed our own piping society.

Really? So who were the worthies? Who were the worthies?

There were only about four of us. Alistair, whose name I'm trying to remember, but it will come back to me. [Alistair Stewart] And there was a man called Ewen Bowie, who finished up as a, he still is I think a fellow of one of the colleges in classics. And Ian Stewart, he was seen around quite a lot on the folk music scene for quite a long time. And all three of them had been to Scottish schools of course, I don't whether they had, I suppose OTC pipe bands, and Ian Stewart who was by far the best of the four of us, he'd been through the College of Piping and he had many stories of Seumas MacNeill, and he was very clear in his mind about what was the correct way to play any given tune and so on. I learnt a lot just by knocking about with these enthusiastic people and experimenting on my own.

Yes. That's an interesting side light that I hadn't been aware of that you had that opportunity.

I did have the opportunity just to rub shoulders and to compare notes and just to enjoy piping with a few other people. We had a Scottish Society as it was called, which was really a Scottish country dancing society, and I got very enthusiastic about that, I got to be the president of it for a short time, although that's not too a difficult accomplishment to do, and I would play for them. They had a tradition at that time that they would have a piper if they could get one and play the eightsome reel at the end of the evening, and I soon took slight control of this and besides playing the eightsome reel we ended up in the summer terms having all our meetings in the evening out of doors and piping, so we had a few pipers amongst, and all the Scottish country dancers had to put up with pipes to listen to. That was a very, very interesting experience for me because I learnt something about how to play for dancing and what dancers needed from the piper.

Yes. And of course that's not something that probably you would have had before indeed.

No. And in fact I was very struck by the fact that most pipers, even really good pipers were not awfully good at playing for dancing. They would put up their pipes and tune and play fine reels and jigs and things in good time, but they would play as if they were playing in a band, they would just play on and on and on and keep the beat and stop at the end and that was it. But you had to I think, well, you'd have to know the dances yourself to do it, to be any good at all, you had to give the dancers time to get around the difficult corners and you also had to compromise on your fingering a bit, you had to keep the music moving.

Yes. And I suppose it says something about the fact that by this point piping and dancing in the sort of old tradition had moved up a certain extent, and that piping had become something which was of itself rather than having this wider context I suppose of the social about it.

Yes. That was very clear to me because most of the country dancing then, as probably today, it was done with typical Scottish country dance bands on records. I suppose Jimmy Shand was the staple, but he had just been displaced by somebody else whose name I can't remember, but the better dancers all that thought Jimmy Shand was a bit passé and that this new man was better.

That this new man was the man to have. Yes.

But I also got to play occasionally for solo highland dancers and a few of our better dancers were good at that and could do exhibition dances, and playing for them they always wanted me to do it and that was much more like mainline piping. But once again you had to study what they were doing and be sensitive to what they wanted.

That's interesting. So Oxford, three years there, four years?

No. I was lucky; I had six, because I did a doctorate there as well.

Oh right. Okay. Yes. So you'd be well into your twenties really by the time you left.

I think I wrote some notes here but I can't... I thought I'd just mention to you, before I get through university and stuff, what other things happened in those days, because I've often wondered what got me into the piping in the first place, apart from the fact that my father was teaching us, you hear bagpipes and it's a fascinating thing and to be a piper is quite something. I can remember the excitement when I first got my set of bagpipes and the first time on the road and it must have sounded awful but it was the pipes that were doing it.

I can also remember, my father had a tremendous amount of attachment for Scotland, the whole family did on his side I'm sure, and he would take us off to Scotland for holidays when it was possible. I can still remember going to Oban for the first time and hearing better piping than I'd heard before. Also for the first time ever I picked up in a bookshop a little book about Gaelic, oh wow, that was quite an eye-opener. I was never a very good student at school, I always preferred to go my own way and not concentrate on what I was supposed to be doing, so as soon as we were being drilled in French at school it was a bit boring, how fascinating to find the fact, well, look they've got irregular verbs in Gaelic as well [laughter].

Well yes. Absolutely. Absolutely [laughter].

So it was nice to have another string, a private string to that bow. I can't say I developed it very far at that time, but I was always a bit wayward, I was always looking for the slightly unusual thing to do or the different thing to do.

What about your academic work? Obviously you've been an academic chemist. Just in passing it would be, what kind of, not that I would be able to understand, but what kind of academic interests drove you during your time at university and with your PhD? Just in passing.

Yes. I understand. I get what you're saying. There was absolutely no doubt in my mind that I wanted to do chemistry. I wanted to do that since before I went to the grammar school. One of the biggest disappointments of my life was to get to the grammar school and find we weren't doing

chemistry for the first two years anyway, that was terrible, that was the lowest point in my life. But things got better when I could do chemistry, but by that time I'd done a lot of chemistry at home, because in those days you could buy chemicals if you knew where to get them and you could do experiments, and I probably knew more chemistry at that time than most people. I found a few like-minded friends who were equally keen on this strange pursuit. So I never had a moment's doubt that that's what I wanted to do and I was just so fortunate to be able to do it really. I now see, I've said this already, but I can't quite believe how the opportunities existed at that time which do not exist now.

No. Indeed. Indeed.

I went to university. I did a degree in chemistry. I went on to do a doctorate in chemistry. I enjoyed the research, I don't think I was tremendously good at it at the time; I got better as time went on. But I was fortunate enough to get an opportunity to go abroad, everybody in those days if you had your PhD and you wanted to get into academic life the next step was to go abroad, usually to America and spend a few years on what is called post-doctoral research, and I did that. How fortunate I was to be able to do it.

I came back to another such position and by the time I was looking for a job there actually were several lectureships going, you could look in the newspaper and find advertisements for posts, you couldn't do that today. So you could send off a sheaf of applications and hope to get some responses. So I had a year back home in Bristol. Not a lot of piping there, but again contact with folk musicians and dancers. I even flirted with English Morris dancing for a short time, we had a side of Morris men and they let me into it and I jigged around with them for a while. I enjoyed the tunes tremendously.

The technical term 'a side of Morris men.'

That's the technical term. Yes. That's right. Yes. Yes. I've forgotten what they're called, they're probably just The Bristol Morris... where I was not terribly good at it, it was always a learning experience.

Yes indeed. And I suppose that the combination of music and dance and so on.

Of course. Yes.

Yes. Absolutely. So as your career and your academic career was going on where's piping fitting into all of this in terms of...?

Well, piping really took a, I just went on as a hobby however, so I played for my own amusement. In the American period I joined a pipe band and we had a lot of fun, but again we were not terribly good, but I met some good pipers amongst them and very interesting people and made friends.

Yes. Whereabouts in the States?

Washington DC.

Washington DC. Right. Okay.

There was a St Andrew's Society Washington DC, as you would expect to find everywhere, and they had a pipe band and they had a pipe major and we enjoyed ourselves, we played for tartan balls and things like that, we were called out to play for all sorts of occasions.

Yes. I can imagine.

It could have been a rather large part of one's life, but I had to keep a control over that really.

Yes. Because of work and so on had to go on?

Well, I've often said if you join a pipe band you've got band practice once a week.

Yes. At least.

At least. Yes. With us once [laughter]. You're doing a job as they say, probably most weeks it was the case, and if you're any good you'll soon

find yourself teaching the beginners and there's three days of the week gone, and you can't do it unfortunately in my profession.

No. And so it was very much a hobby?

It had to be.

It had to be. Yes.

It just had to be, that was the only way it could be. But I was very fortunate in another way. When I got to Oxford I'd already realised that there was a tremendous amount of intellectual interest to be had from piping, in fact before that time I can still remember tuning into the wireless as we called it, the radio, and there on I think The Third Programme as it was called, there was a programme about bagpipe music, because I know now exactly what it was, it was a talk by Seumas MacNeill, he was giving a talk and he was giving out his theory about the pipe's scale, all the numerical intervals, well of course as a mathematician I lapped this one up instantly and spent quite a lot of time thinking about the ratios and the intervals. And it gave me an insight to the fact that there were people out there who were studying piping as well as doing it, and when I got to Oxford it wasn't long before I found just by chance wandering into the university museum, discovered that there's a second half of the museum called the Pitt-Rivers Museum, you'll have heard of it I'm sure.

Indeed. Indeed. Yes, I have.

And there around a corner was a great glass case absolutely full of bagpipes, and I hardly knew by that time that there were bagpipes in other places besides Scotland. I'd heard of Northumbrian pipes of course and Irish ones, but here there were Bulgarian and Hungarian and Romanian and Arabic, all jumbled together in a great big glass case and it was fascinating to study. And I soon found out that attached to this museum there was a library and I chatted to the Librarian and I said "what about all these bagpipes, what are you doing with them?" And they said "oh yes, we've got a man who's writing a book about them," and he was in fact Anthony Baines, another name you'll probably know.

Indeed. Absolutely. Yes.

Because in 1961 his book came out, which is basically a catalogue of the Pitt-Rivers collection. And this was probably the first time I discovered that there were actually academics out there doing research on piping, and I thought this is an open field here, why aren't more people doing it and why isn't everybody doing it? Why aren't they all fascinated by this? So I didn't get active in that, but I learnt a tremendous amount from Baines's book. I also found one or two books in the library, some of which are quite regrettable, but nevertheless fired the imagination.

And so the first thing I really discovered that I could in any way contribute to was the fact that there had at one time been such a thing as English bagpipes, after all I was in England so I had to make do with the sources that I had available, I couldn't find very much of the Scottish material from where I was based. But I got onto this and started collecting material and eventually compiled a couple of articles, some of which I still believe in the content of it, that there had been at one time a tradition of playing bagpipes more widely than Scotland and I tried to find out whatever I could about it.

Yes. And did you manage to meet Baines and speak to him?

I've never met him in the flesh, but several times I've spoken to him and one time I was actually asked to revise and complete an article he himself had written earlier, do you know the Grove Dictionary of Music?

Yes. Yes.

Well, eventually they came to me and said would I revise the article on bagpipes for this, and the existing article was by William Cocks, a Northumbrian piper, and Anthony Baines. And Cocks was dead by then for quite a few years, and I thought it was a good idea to have a chat to Anthony Baines and send him a letter and so on, and he wrote back to me in a rather very friendly, but slightly lordly fashion saying "it is many years since I've felt any interest in bagpipes, so over to you." [Laughter] so it was over to me. I'm not sure I did a good job at that time. I did my best, that's all I can say really.

Yes. So you were collecting. This was presumably while you were still in Oxford; this was a hobby time when you were away from work and studying and so on.

It was a hobby time. That's right. Yes. Very much. I think actually doing research on English bagpipes came a bit later when I had slightly more ability to travel and I was living in Norwich and I could go down to the British Museum and look at the rare books. But the other thing that fascinated me very much, I went to my, Oxford University has got an amazing libraries, as you know.

Indeed. Yes. Absolutely. Yes. Yes. Indeed. Absolutely.

When I began to discover that there were old books on piping and I'd better get to grips with some of these, I went down to the library very confidently expecting to find copies of Angus MacKay and Donald MacDonald, and not a thing [laughter].

Not a thing to be found, no.

They were not interested in piping at the time when those books came out. But one thing I did discover and they had a copy of Joseph MacDonald's Compleat Theory, not the first edition, an edition of it, and I got this amazing book. By this time I knew enough about piobaireachd to know what I was reading, I could even play it to a certain degree, and to open up this book which is a totally different take, or seemed to be a totally different take on piobaireachd and it took me right back a century earlier than everything else.

Yes. A window into the 18th century.

And of course I'd already by this time read the Kilberry Book, so I knew what I was looking at, and Kilberry was one of the few people who'd really appreciated Joseph MacDonald for what he was. So nothing would do but I must have a copy of this book, but what do you do in 1960 and photocopying hadn't even been invented, well, I know it had been invented but it hadn't got to Oxford. There was only one way really, you go in the library night after night and you copy the whole thing out, which is what I did. I'm amused now to think that I'm probably one of the last people who actually sat down and copied a complete book of pipe music

from beginning to end. I mean Kilberry had been doing it before the wars. But it was an interesting experience. I often tell people that I think if you sit down and slowly and copy something out; it drills itself into your mind.

Yes. You can permeate it into your head. Yes. Absolutely. Absolutely.

You almost think you've got to know the author by the time you finish.

Yes. Had you become involved with the Piobaireachd Society by this point?

Not by that point. No. I knew about it and I knew of the Kilberry Book and heard of the Piobaireachd Society. I can tell you exactly how I got involved with that, and it was much later, an advertisement I think appeared in the Piping Times. I was reading the Piping Times by this time because I'd heard about that and the College of Piping of course through my other contacts.

And presumably if you were writing articles, the Piping Times would be an outlet for these.

Well, it should have been. It should be. Yes. We won't go into that too deeply. But yes, I could get stuff into the Piping Times. Yes.

Okay. Well, I think that in itself probably tells us something. Yes.

Anyway, the Piping Times suddenly announced that the Piobaireachd Society was going to have a conference and anyone could go to it. So I signed up immediately and went to it. This was the first one that took place at Minard Castle in 1970 odd.

Oh yes. About 1973 I think it was.

Was it?

Yes. 1973 or '74, I think.

I can still remember very vividly going to that conference. It was just about that time that it became apparent that anyone who wished to could join the Piobaireachd Society, so I managed to do so and I got a signature from somebody up there, so that's when I joined. And it was a fascinating affair, well, you've probably got lots of people who've talked to you about their first Piobaireachd Society conference I'm sure. But I can still remember the journey up from Norwich, it's a long, long way and getting up to Minard was a bit of a challenge, but I had the great good fortune too, through John MacFadyen and I got a lift in the car from Donald MacLeod [laughter], yes, he took me up there, which was very nice of him. And I learnt a lot just by hearing him and his companion talking piping as we were going along.

So that was yourself, John MacFadyen and Donald MacLeod, was it?

As far as I can remember it was actually Donald MacLeod and D.R. McLennan, they were the other two guys in the car.

They were the other two guys in the car. Yes.

There I met all the famous people, and many of them seemed to be meeting each other for the first time, at least for the first time in a very long period, and it was one of those magic moments when suddenly an interest group forms and lots of people who didn't realise how interested other people were in what they were doing, discovered this. I've had that experience several times, once in connection with chemistry, once certainly with the Piobaireachd Society conference, we've already counted that, and very much more recently in Wales, a conference was organised all about Welsh harp music and I went to it and I discovered that loads of people had turned up, all of whom thought that they were working on their own and found out they weren't.

There was in fact a ready made academic community there for them.

Yes. That's right. So those things do happen in life sometimes. So that's how I got acquainted anyway with Seumas and John MacFadyen and General Richardson and Peter Cooke, he was a young academic at the time that he'd attended this conference.

Now, that would be just presumably not long after he'd written about Maol Donn because that article appeared in the early 70s, didn't it?

Yes, it did. I don't even remember whether he'd written it then or was about to write it. I don't remember that I'm afraid, but yes, it was.

Yes. So it was either gestating or it had just appeared.

That's right. Yes. I reckon that as far as influence, if you're looking for influences Peter Cooke's article was a very important one. And before that, do you know the name of Robin Lorimer?

Yes, I do. Indeed.

Well, he'd written two articles in Scottish Studies.

He did, way back in the 50's. That's right. Yes.

I think so. And I found those in the university library and lapped them up. And that was probably the real introduction to the fact that you could do proper academic stuff on piobaireachd, by 'proper' I mean with footnotes [laughter] and references and solid arguments in favour.

Yes. Which were based on evidence rather than on speculation.

Exactly so. Yes. Yes. So I was well aware that there was a sort of academic sub-culture, but there were very few people. Peter Cooke was a pioneer in so many ways actually. And I also got the idea then that a bit of fieldwork wouldn't be a bad idea. Probably I was before my time and I was certainly a bit out of my depth, but I did it. An it was about, it must have been, I can date it to 1961 I think because I was just coming to the end of university and I had not yet gone abroad to America, and together with my wife and a couple of friends we got in touch, well, first of all we got advice from Hamish Henderson at the School of Scottish Studies, I had a naïve notion that if you went around the Highlands with your tape recorder you might find old pipers who could play you piobaireachds and the like in a way different from Angus MacKay and the Piobaireachd Society, in other words, it was the idea that there had been, if you like, a folk music of piping which had been swept to one side by the modern

movements. And I still think that's probably true, but I didn't have the good fortune to find any such pipers.

So how did you come to that understanding? If I could just take you back.

Yes, do.

Because that's an interesting view at that time.

Yes. I think it was an interesting view at that time.

Because of it's very different from what I would understand would be coming out perhaps of other mainstream piping institutions, such as the Army, such as the College, such as the Piobaireachd Society.

Yes. Totally different.

So how did you come to that?

Well, I can tell you. From my earliest tuition from my father and all his piping from manuscripts, I inherited a book. My father had this book from his older brother Angus, and Angus had had it given to him by his father, and it was in fact William Ross's collection of piobaireachds. Nowadays the so called Uilleam Ross. And we had this book and it was pretty clear that nobody in our family had really made much use of this book, it was in very good condition, it was just sitting there, and I now know that it was a present given by my grandfather to his son Angus when he left and went into the army to become a piper, and Charles Cannon had laid out some money for this rather handsome book.

Yes. Well, it is a very handsome volume.

It is. And he thought it would be a good parting gift, and Angus rather ruefully mentioned, not to his father I'm sure, but to my father, that when he got amongst the other pipers he really wished that he had a few books of Logans, Willie Ross, it wasn't very much use to him personally because it was very old for that time. Anyway, I got stuck into piobaireachd as a result, that was my introduction to piobaireachd and trying to play these

extraordinary pieces of music. Now, you don't get very far with piobaireachd before you realise that what's written on the page cannot be exactly as it had always been, there were so many movements, grace notes, and of course I knew a bit about the pentatonic scale by this time, and when you see a tune which is all in the pentatonic scale of A, B, D, E, F, and there are great massive grace notes of low G in it, I'm talking about the 'Lament for Donald Ban MacCrimmon, well, it was blindingly obvious to me that it couldn't always have been played in the same way that we were hearing it today, there has to be an evolution behind it.

So that was one factor. Another factor was of course that I had plenty of exposure to what you might call 'folk music' by that time, and folk dancing and stuff like that, and it was also pretty obvious that the ways of playing reels, jigs and strathspeys, which are prevalent in competition, were not the sort of thing that would normally be accepted by the dancers who were dancing around the kitchen table in the Hebrides. So there was clear evidence that there was a stratum here, a history, this whole history we had and I wanted to unpick it and find out how it had been... hence the idea that there might be still some pipers around who could remember the old ways.

Well, Hamish Henderson was very helpful to us, this enthusiastic party of us arrived in Edinburgh with an appointment to talk to Hamish and he took us through all sorts of things and he recommended lots of names of people he thought we ought to go and see. He gently warned me that what I was looking for would not be found, the military influence in piping was so strong, and how right he was of course. But he sent me off and I latched onto a very nice, very old man in Perth whose name was Henry MacGregor, he belonged to one of the traveling families, and Henry MacGregor, Hamish had discovered him himself some years beforehand, and Henry McGregor could sing in canntaireachd, and that's what he did for me and we got to his house with a terrible old ropy tape recorder and sat there and recorded several of his songs, well, pipe tunes. Pipe tunes. I can hear them now in my head. I mean if I sing canntaireachd, that's what I'm basically still trying to do, trying to record Henry MacGregor's words. So this proved to me that there was something to be done there but of course I had no opportunity, I went abroad almost immediately, and came back and was busy with other things.

Did you keep the tapes of Henry MacGregor?

I've still got them. Yes. Yes. Yes. I even passed on copies to the School of Scottish Studies, and I've still got them and they need to be properly digitised. I've since discovered that the School of Scottish Studies has got quite a number of tapes of Henry MacGregor as well, so it fits in.

So it all fits in. So that was really how your interest was piqued by this.

Yes. That's right.

I suppose the chronological order has somewhat collapsed, but that's all right.

Have we?

That's because we've been at the Piobaireachd Society conference there in the early 1970's.

Yes. I'm sorry.

No. That's fine. You suddenly find I suppose, when you get to the Piobaireachd Society conference and there is a whole group of people here who are coming together, which must have acted as quite a spur and quite something that really, almost kind of an epiphany in some ways.

In some ways. These things do happen.

In some ways. This was going on.

Yes. It's going on. That's right.

And what was the consequence of that for yourself in terms of your piping?

For my piping? I just couldn't...

I mean piping in the broadest sense. I mean in the broadest sense.

Yes. The consequence for me was that I realised that there was research to be done if only I could find time to do it, and I did some of it.

Yes. Because presumably you'd be working in a department of chemistry at this time.

Yes. Yes. One had to try and keep a check on some of those things. I found out pretty quickly that it wasn't easy to get it accepted. Eventually as I got bolder I would offer myself to maybe give a talk or something like that, or perhaps I might get an article published and these offers were politely received but not, on the whole, acted on. I was very impressed by this business of the possible history, the evolution of piobaireachd, the fact that things might have been different at one time and I had pretty hard evidence by this time that that was the case, and this evidence was not at all acceptable to anybody that I could discover, other than Peter Cooke.

So I took a long time to get that kind of thing across actually, it did take me a long time. But one thing I did do which proved to me a much safer bet, because you see, I had this terrible experience with libraries and you could never get a hold of the pipe music books that you wanted. So I started to scientifically create a catalogue of pipe music books and I discovered also in our college library several learned text books on how to do bibliographies, how to research the contents of books. But they were all mostly about Shakespearean studies, not modern piping books. I learnt a lot from those books and I finally got the idea that writing an actual bibliography of bagpipe music would not be a bad idea, and this gradually grew, like a stamp collection, you add more and more information.

And of course this was the Bibliography of Bagpipe Music that appeared in 1980.

That's right. And I had two excellent experiences in that I used to, eventually I would come up to Edinburgh or Glasgow and look in the libraries and I can still remember hitchhiking all the way to Edinburgh to go and see the National Library. Did I tell you this one before?

No. No.

Well, there I am hitchhiking up north, I'm based in Manchester and I'm going off to Edinburgh, and this was before motorways of course. So I get a ride with this one lorry driver after another, and the last one was a very nice Scottish lorry driver and we're just driving over the Cheviot Hills, and he said "you're going all the way to Edinburgh just to read a book!" [Laughter]. And I said "yeah, it's a good book." [Laughter]. And I can clearly remember getting to the National Library for the very first time, wow, what a place, that's another one of those great moments.

The building was the same, but the people were all different, and you went up these palatial steps into this wonderful reading room and there was this dear lady called Miss Marion Linton who was in charge. They had a music room in those days devoted entirely to music, and they couldn't be more kind and helpful. And I went in there and finally I got to see Donald MacDonald's book and I know it was the first edition that I was looking at, but then it was, it was all these extraordinary tunes and all these extraordinary grace notes, and it took quite a moment to turn the pages of such an old book. So that got done, and interestingly it became acceptable to the Piobaireachd Society and eventually I gave a talk to the Piobaireachd Society conference about the bibliography of bagpipe music.

So when would this be?

I wish I could tell you. I should have researched it.

Yes. Well, we can, it will be on there.

I think you'll find it's about the first serious contribution I made to anything of this sort

How did it become acceptable to the Piobaireachd Society? There's obviously somebody in here who's...

There must have been. I wasn't in there at all. But I do know that I had quite a bit of support from Seumas McNeill, he liked the stuff I was giving him for the Piping Times and we got on well all right, and that was one aspect of it. I think he recognised he wanted the Piping Times to cover all aspects of piping and he really was an academic at heart and did feel that

the... interestingly I now know there was quite an interesting split between him and John MacFadyen as to what the Piobaireachd Society conference should be all about, and John MacFadyen was all for it should be about the policy of piping and the competition system and judging, politics, piping politics was what the conference was for. But Seumas of course saw it much more like an academic conference and people should come there and give papers and discuss the history of the ...

Well, he was an academic.

That's right and that's what he wanted it to be. Now, I've seen letters between the two of them expressing these points. And Seumas would always accept stuff for the Piping Times if it was reasonably well written, so it was possible to get stuff into the Piping Times. So that was the thing. But my own personal take on this is that the bibliography of bagpipe music was a safe subject. You know? You've got the books there.

Yes. Well, you either have a book or you don't.

Exactly. So nobody can gainsay the fact that the books exist, but they can certainly gainsay the idea that those double echoes were once played differently, one from the other.

Well, absolutely. Absolutely. Yes.

So I think that ultimately was the salvation of it really, they couldn't argue against that. Again this talk, an interesting experience, very enjoyable. Gosh, I could go on for hours about it.

Well, tell us a bit about it. Tell us a bit about it.

Something sticks in my mind, the fact that to introduce it, I introduced it with... the bibliography covered the whole of the British Isles, not just the Highlands, so I started off by saying there are bagpipes outside the island region and listen to this and this is some Northumbrian pipes and there's the music on the side. And then here's an Irish pipe tune. And quite a lot of people got really fascinated by that and so we got lots of nice compliments afterwards about that. And I can also remember Captain D.R. McLennan who was sitting in the front row, and I was giving a talk

and they had would you believe an epidiascope for the, do you know what that is?

I don't. No.

Well, before the days of slide projectors or Powerpoint, there was a machine where you could lay the actual page of the book down like this and a strong light would shine upon it and then with the aid of mirrors the image would appear on the screen, it didn't have to transmit through, it just reflected off, so that was an epidiascope. So you could bring in your old pipe music books and shove them under the epidiascope. The previous speaker to me was also confronted with this machine and discovered that none of his pieces of paper would fit in under the platen or whatever you call it, so he was having a desperate run up with nail scissors cutting all these pieces, over the coffee break, cutting them all down. I think I scored a bit because we were ready, Elizabeth and me we were ready with our material, we'd found out how the epidiascope actually worked, so we did that.

I can see now it was an over elaborate talk. I had about twenty or thirty slides and Elizabeth, that's my wife, was sitting there and she was feeding the papers into this thing and I was rapping out the numbers, "right, slide two, slide six, slide ten." And afterwards dear old Captain D.R. McLennan came up to me and said "I think you were a bit abrupt with your commands." [Laughter]. Well, he was a Sergeant Major, he should know.

Well, that's right. Yes. Absolutely. Yes. Absolutely.

But there were lots of lovely nice people there. But another thing that came out of that was I made quite a play about a certain book which was not very well known, it was published in 1940 odd by a man called Malcolm MacInnes.

Yes. Yes.

Bagpipe tunes.

Bagpipe Cuttings and Gleanings. Was that the one?

That's right. Yes. And I had no idea that this was going to be such the hit that it would. And David Murray, Colonel Murray as he was, knew that book very well from his early days and he came and really congratulated me on having found this interesting work, because of course it does contain a few heretical suggestions about piping, they're deeply buried, but they are there. And I think David Murray also felt just as I did that there was an awful lot behind piping that you don't see and he wanted to see that brought out. So a few people took an interest in that work. It took a lot longer to get any of this stuff across in public though.

I gave a talk about the Gesto canntaireachd at that time, and that was very, well, to me very interesting because I was able to put forward some suggestions that piping had not always been the same as it was today. I got two or three people to play the illustrations from that one of which was Robert Wallace and he played illustrations from the Gesto book with gracings according to the lines that I was suggesting. I've always had a great admiration for Robert Wallace actually, he has always been at the forefront of... well he, yes, I think he has been something of a free thinker and certainly a very innovative player, and he was the man who introduced bellows piping really as far as we're concerned.

Yes. And involved with the Whistlebinkies and so on.

That's right. Yes. Yes. So that was very supportive I thought and very nice. Of course I now respect, is this all going in public? [Laughter].

Yes.

I absolutely respect the fact that he's moved away from that position, because he's told me several times that having experimented with these different ideas about piobaireachd he's come to the conclusion that the standard model is broadly correct and that's what he wants to play and I think that's fine, if you've tried it and liked it, fine by me.

Yes. Absolutely.

It's the people who won't try it that I have difficulty with.

Yes. Indeed. Indeed. So you're speaking at the Piobaireachd Society conference, what's the next major piece of work that you do in terms of piping? Because there are a number of publications that have come from your pen in terms of the editions and your Joseph MacDonald and Donald MacDonald and so on.

Yes. Possibly too many I suspect. I should have brought my list of publications and we could have guided ourselves through it. We can do another session sometime. Most of what I do and have done has been going on for a very long time. I mean I started working on MacLeod of Gesto way back in the 1960s when I first discovered the book and copied it all out and tried to translate it into music, and ran into difficulties and put it to one side.

The same was true with editing Joseph MacDonald. I had two major goes at that and first of all I wrote it out back in about 1961 in hand and I translated the whole thing and wrote commentaries for myself and then it just didn't get done. Then I got the chance to publish it much later and essentially started again from scratch, but with the benefit of the experience. So nearly everything that's come out has taken a very long time in construction.

The same was true of the English bagpipe dimension because I went at that in the late 60's and early 70's and produced two articles which I was satisfied with. One was the historical references, and the second one was about the music, because I discovered there were several sources of music from which one could reconstruct how English bagpipe music might have been. But I thought I would follow this straight away with an article about what the bagpipe looked like and how it was constructed, based on old pictures and things. And I ran into great difficulty there because I lost all confidence in the actual pictures and I learnt much more and more how artists copy from each other and copy wrong things from each other and I began to doubt whether there actually were any believable pictures of south border bagpipes. And I finally came out with this view at a conference in 1980 something, 1981, it took place in Oxford, and that was another one of these great moments which I think I've forgotten to mention. I'm afraid we're going back and forth. I'm just reminiscing.

Well, that's fine. That's fine. That's fine.

You need to know this goes back to the roots in Oxford. The Pitt-Rivers Museum, the bagpipe collection. The fact that more and more people unknown to me were getting interested in these exotic bagpipes. And a lady called Helene La Rue was the curator by this time of the Pitt-Rivers Museum I think, certainly the ethno musicology side and I think it was her idea to convene a conference of interested people. I don't think it had a title and it took place in London and about forty or fifty people came from all directions and they turned out to be people like myself who were academics interested in this stuff. There were traditional pipers, Northumberland, Highland and Breton. They were a new generation of bagpipe makers. You'll have heard of Julian Goodacre.

Yes. Indeed. And I have indeed met him.

He was there. The Goodacre brothers were there. There was John Swayne, so were several of the others. And this conference eventually led to what's called the Bagpipe Society; that was the founding moment of the Bagpipe Society really. And there were several talks given and I gave one of them and I talked about English bagpipes from pictures, I was now making the opposite case to what I'd been ten years before, I was saying really we've got all these interesting pictures, but almost none of them should be taken at face value. If you look at this one, it's a copy of that one; it's a copy of that one. And I eventually sifted out and came down to a very, very small nucleus of pictures which I believed in. And that seems to have had some effect, since then people have followed that work and made lots of new discoveries. So I discovered I'd become a sort of founding father of the Bagpipe Society [Laughter].

Yes. Not inappropriately.

A curious situation to find yourself in.

Yes. Yes. We've been talking for almost an hour and I think we could probably go on for some considerable time, and my own view would be that it would be really nice to perhaps continue this conversation at some point in the future once...

Yes. I'm very happy to do that.

Once I've done a bit more work and you've done a bit more preparation.

Yes. I have a bit more preparation to do.

But one of the things that I think would be nice to finish off with really would be to seek your views on the academic side of piping today. It seems to me a novice in working in this area that it's a pretty healthy state. Would you agree with that?

It's in a very healthy state in the sense that there are far more people now actively interested and far more opportunities to publish the work. We have a few journals now where you can send articles in on piping and expect to get them accepted and sensibly refereed. In that sense it's in a very healthy state. I think it's a bit fragile. I don't know how many people there are in academic positions doing, well, I know a few of them personally. I've even supervised one and checked a few theses for them. But the entire academic profession is fragile as far as I can see; nothing is like it was in my day. But I was secure and fortunate, because being a physical scientist at a time when physical science was the coming thing.

Yes. It was the white heat of technology, I believe.

That kind of thing. Yes. Yes. Yes. There was even money available for a while [laughter]. Nowadays you almost have to make your own. So I'm absolutely thrilled with the Conservatoire, with the Piping Centre, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig and the work at the School of Scottish Studies. But when you go around you don't see very many people. I look at the Celtic departments now; they've shrunk and amalgamated almost. So in that sense it's a bit sad to see, but the great thing is the enthusiasm's still there, people are not going to stop doing the work just because they're not getting public support.

Yes. I suppose in a way as well we touched on this earlier, I think one of the things that strikes me about it is that the research work is actually being done in a, if you like, this sounds very snobby and I don't mean it to sound like that, but it's being done in an academic respectable way, it's not merely speculation.

You mean it's now being done in a respectable way?

It's now being done, yes. Yes.

Yes. That's right. I think it's fair to say a lot of it still isn't being done in a respectable way.

Yes.

I won't point fingers or name names. But I was reading a book recently on Scottish place names by a very respected authority and he talked about how place names is one of those academic subjects which everybody seems to have views about and everybody seems to know what their place names mean and so forth, and they don't stop to think about it. And this author talked about it's good to see now that some books are disappearing from library shelves, which they ought never to have occupied in the first place. When I started out that was the state of bagpipe music.

And I can tell you, I can think of only two books pertaining to piping, bagpipes and piobaireachd, which I would say are hundred percent good books at the time when I was there. One was an article in the Encyclopedia Britannica about 1911, a very, very learned article by a lady called Kathleen Schlesinger, and I learnt a tremendous amount by reading that, and what she had done with a very unsatisfactory source of material that she had was amazing, it's critically assessed even though the work itself had not been critically conceived.

And the second was the Kilberry Book of Ceòl Mòr, and the introduction by Kilberry, I now see it in retrospect being an absolutely groundbreaking piece of writing from piping history. And the great thing about it is I know see that, not that he was necessarily right on every point, but he told you where he was coming from, you see, you could trace more or less his sources, he wasn't always very good at that and I now know part of the reason, because some of his sources were still in private hands and he was not at liberty even to say where the manuscripts were, let alone anything else. But nevertheless, those ten or a dozen pages about the history of piping, when you compare what was written before that time and see what Kilberry did with the material it's very, very inspiring. Since then of

course there's been plenty of good books. But that's what there was, and if you had a shelf full of books about piping back in 1950, there wouldn't be very many worth reading.

No, there wouldn't. No. It wouldn't be much of a shelf. Absolutely. Well, Roddy, thank you very much for taking the time to come and talk to us for Noting the Tradition. It's been for me an illuminating experience. It's been something that I think will add to our store of knowledge about piping and where it has come from, and I think it's a conversation that we could probably continue with for some considerable time, and I think that we should do that in the future.

Yes.

But for the time being, Professor Roddy Cannon, thank you very much indeed.

Well, thank you for having me.

