



## **NOTING THE TRADITION**

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



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**Well this is James Beaton for Noting the Tradition. I'm here in the National Piping Centre with Ronald Clark and we are going to speak about Ronald's career in piping. Today is the 25<sup>th</sup> of October, and I am looking forward very much to hearing about your life in piping, Ron. Thanks very much for taking part in the project.**

Not at all.

**So I would like to take you back really to the start of your piping career. You were born and brought up in Aberdeenshire, is that right?**

Born in Aberdeenshire and moved to Perthshire when I was about two.

**Right, and were so your parents originally from Aberdeenshire?**

Yes, yes, both from rural Aberdeenshire.

**And did you move to a kind of, rural area there?**

Yes, outside Aberfeldy, about four miles from Aberfeldy.

**And so they were in the farming community there, I take it.**

Yes, my father was a gardener on an estate. Quite a large estate and the main, the farm it had an Aberdeen Angus pedigree herd, but then the lady of the house she, her interest was in gardening and it was a large gardens, and my father, I think he went there, I was about six. He was head gardener-six gardeners he had underneath him.

**My goodness. Quite a Victorian set-up. And so was there much piping round about that part of Perthshire when you were growing up, do you think?**

There was some. My father played in the Aberfeldy Pipe Band for a few years under Jock Spence. Sandy Spence's father and, but there

were local pipers, Sandy, myself, my brother Eddie and Duncan McDiarmid. You know at that time, Alan Cameron and in Pitlochry Alan MacRae, who at the time was Pipe Major of the Atholl Highlanders, so, you know piobaireachd was, at that time, aye, it was not particularly strong.

**No, but there was obviously...**

It was going on, it was going on.

**But there was always a piping background in your family.**

Yes, yes.

**From Aberdeenshire?**

Yes, my father...

**So, if you could tell us a little bit about that.**

Aye, well my father originally learnt from a man called, I think was, MacKellar up in Aberdeenshire. I am not sure where and he did say that he went to this man for lessons at the same time as John MacDougall's father.

**Oh right.**

Bucksburn, and then between the wars, he was in the Gordon Highlanders TA, and he played in their band, and when they moved up to Strathdon, it is on the Inverearnan estate and he played in the Lonach Pipe Band and the pipe major of that band was Willie Grant, who composed those tunes like Lonach Highland Gathering, the Doune of Invernochty, all these tunes. In fact, the Doune, of Invernochty, that is a little hill up in Strathdon, and during the Second World War, my father was in the ARP, and they had the observatory post in the top...

**Of the Doune of Invernochty...that is a great story.**

They used to, along with Willie Grant who had been in the Scots Guards prior to this. And they used to take the chanters up with them. I don't know how much observing they did, but...

**They had a tune anyway. That is great. And so was your father, your principal teacher to start off with?**

To start off with, yes. He got me going but then, you know, probably about the age of eight or nine and maybe about a year, two years played but never got on to the pipes. Then I stopped playing. And then, when I was at university, another brother of mine, Gordon, he had been out in New Zealand for three years and on his way back in the ship, he met this young lad Alistair Munro coming from New Zealand to compete in the games. Alistair actually came and stayed with us a few nights before he went on his travels around the games. We decided that we would go and hear him play and was when I listened to the solo piping at the games and it was then that my interest sort of came back. I wanted to do this again.

**So you would be, what, in your late teens?**

Yes, I would be 18, 19 and so...

**About a decade when you had not....**

That's right. Alistair himself, he suggested some names that I could go to in Edinburgh where I was at university among them George Stoddart and one or two others, and at the time, George had a shop, up on the Royal Mile in the Lawnmarket, so I went into the shop one day, and I said to George, "do you give lessons?" So he asked about myself. He said, well no, actually I don't, but he said, I will put you in touch with somebody who will give you lessons and that was Hugh MacRae. So I contacted Hugh and I started lessons with Hugh.

**Yes, now what was his background?**

Well, he had...his working life was with the rail companies and he started at Achnasheen which was up near his home.

**So he was from Wester Ross?**

Yes, and then, I think around the Second...the start of the Second World War, he moved down to Glasgow because he taught at the College of Piping and he was on the board for a time and then I am not sure when he moved through to Edinburgh and so I started going for lessons with Hugh.

**I mean, do you know who taught him.**

Yes, John MacDonald, Inverness, he taught Hugh MacRae. He also, Willie Ross used to do a sort of travel round the Highlands , teaching the communities and they also had tuition in light music from Willie Ross. I remember him saying it was Willie Ross sorted out my light music playing and John McDonald was his, I am not sure, if he was his only teacher but certainly his principal teacher.

**Yes, of course, Hugh MacRae\* was a gold medallist in that sort of....**

Gold medallist in nineteen thirty seven, when it was still outdoors and I remember Hugh telling me a lovely story that he had come to the Northern Meeting to compete while it was still outdoors, this may have been before he won his medal, and there he was tuning up and John McDonald was actually a steward and Hugh said he could see John MacDonald listening from a wee bit off, and then he came over and told Hugh to stop playing to the pipes. He said “Your pipes are awful MacRae, that chanter reed’s no use,” and he went into his waistcoat pocket and took out a little tin and took out a reed and put it in his chanter. “Try that MacRae”, so he tried it and oh, what a difference, the chanter was right and he got the drones going. So he went on and played and when he had stopped, he came down the

steps from the board and at the foot of the steps, “I’ll have my reed back MacRae!”

**He was not giving the reed away for any great length of time. But he won the Gold Medal**

I don’t know if it was that year or not...

**So Hugh MacRae had lessons with him, that was both light music and piobaireachd..**

My real interest very quickly became piobaireachd. You know, I quite enjoy playing light music but I felt at that stage, having lost ten years, I had to concentrate on...

**On one thing.**

On one thing and piobaireachd was what I wanted to do and I had had some insight into piobaireachd from my father. We never had formal tuition but we had heard Willie Grant play piobaireachd, and my father was very interested in it, and he had the books and he used to sit around in the evenings and looking at tunes and playing them and I sort of picked up a wee bit.

**I mean, kind of in terms of Willie Grant's piobaireachd playing, where would that have come from?**

I have no idea. No idea. I mean, he was originally from the Newtonmore area, so you know he could have been in the John MacDonald area, although, I do not think he was known as a piobaireachd player.

**No.**

But he certainly could play piobaireachd because I remember Willie Grant's son, Ian who was a pipe major in the Gordon Highlanders, when he was home on leave, and have piping sessions and similarly Ian could never get through a whole tune. His father used to get quite

annoyed at him and grab the pipes from him. He would play a piobaireachd and go as far as the third variation or something and then things would go wrong and old Willie used to get quite annoyed about this.

**So in terms of your piobaireachd with Hugh MacRae, what sort of tunes were you looking at with him.**

Well, I remember he...I remember him saying, he said, “You are picking this up very quickly.” He said, “You seem to be grasping it quickly”, and I think this was really quite a big mistake, you know, when I look back on Hugh’s part, he said, why don't you start learning the Gold Medal tunes.

**So what sort of period are we talking about? The 50s?**

1960s. 1967. I remember, the tunes, I remember some of them now, one was the MacIntyre’s Salute, the other one was All the Men Paid Rent but Rory. The Bicker was another one but I cannot remember it now, but really, you know, when I look back, that was far too early in my piping to be...

**To be tackling tunes of that nature...**

Yes, well, maybe not the difficulty of the tunes but really that Hugh was preparing me to play at a level and I was not nearly ready for it, I realise that now. I think he felt, and that might have been trying to give me a goal, something to aim for, in terms of...I had technique. I was okay. In terms of instrument and all the things that go to make a good performance, I just was not ready . So I started competing at a level which was really beyond me at that stage.

**So did you go in for professional competition?**

Yes, I played at an amateur competition through in Glasgow, that was my first competition and then, it was Gold Medal which really was...

**And of course in the days when you could turn up and play in the Gold Medal.**

Aye, yes, that's right. I just was not ready for that level of competing. So I continued with Hugh until I finished my degree and then I decided to go into teaching and come through to Glasgow to Jordanhill to do my teacher training and I found out about Pipe Major Peter Bain who was giving lessons at the old Govan High School. So I used to get the underground from my digs, through to Govan and I more or less had Peter Bain to myself, I think there was only another two, one of two going in that particular evening.

**Now, was he a Scots Guardsman?**

He was a Scots Guardman and a very nice man and...

**Originally from-do you know where he was from at all?**

I think it was the North West.

**The North West, right,**

I'm not sure exactly where and what happened at Govan High School, we had a classroom to ourselves, played the pipes and Peter would come and give us tuition and then he would move on to somebody else. So he continued with piobaireachd with me, and then he taught me Corrienessan's Salute. So he went back over Corrienessan's Salute which Hugh had done with me, but there were differences in the way that Peter Bain had played it.

**Yes, so that is-I mean, that is interesting in itself and, I mean, one of the things I suppose looking at Hugh MacRae, for example, having gone to John McDonald and so on, and the kind of scholarly work that has been done about the Piobaireachd Society, the various controversies and so on, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which John MacDonald was kind of involved and**



**so on. Did you get any sense of that from Hugh MacRae at all, when you were being taught by him.**

I remember him, he taught me Tullochard, Book Six and the way that the siubhal is written and I remember him telling me that John MacDonald was really very annoyed at the way it had been written and it departs from the them, and that John MacDonald had written a letter to the Piobaireachd Society complaining about this tune in particular, but presumably now it will be in the archives somewhere.

**I would imagine so.**

Because John McDonald had taught and played and the way it is written in Ceòl Mòr, which follows the same structure as the taorluath and crunluath, so there were controversies going on back then about how the tunes were being set out, but that is the only tune I can remember that Hugh referred to.

**Right, but it is interesting that there was this difference as well with Peter Bain looking at Corrienessan slightly differently from Hugh MacRae, I mean, what were the nub of the differences.**

Well, the main difference, there were slight differences in the ground but nothing major, just gracenotes notes and [singing] not playing certain grace notes in the ground but in the first variation, [singing] Peter Bain [singing] and then the same structure in the taorluath [singing] and that...

**Right. Just a difference in that, I suppose, a difference in emphasis. I suppose you kind of, well, it bears out, that the fact that there were different traditions around, these things did happen.**

Referring back to, it is quite interesting that I have a recording of Robert Brown playing Tullochard and he plays it, that variation as it

is written in the Piobaireachd Society. Most of his teaching came from John McDonald\*, so he did not play the Ceòl Mòr way.

**No. Which I suppose in itself is telling that...absolutely. So teacher training in Glasgow, going to be a maths teacher and Peter Bain and so get to the end of the post-graduate diploma, where next?**

My first teaching post was in Kirkcaldy, so from Kirkcaldy I came back to Hugh, and I was also travelling to Edinburgh to see Maureen

**A happy coincidence...**

...and then after a year, that would have taken me to 60, yes, 1960 that is right, 1968, and I transferred to Armadale Academy and Maureen and I got married and we lived in Edinburgh.

**So you were travelling out to West Lothian every day for work?**

Yes, still continuing with Hugh.

**And still very much piobaireachd focused...I mean, what were you doing, were you doing any competing round about this time or were you...**

I was starting to competing at the local mod up in Aberfeldy and that sort of thing but not... The occasional games, competing at Birnam Games but not really very much...but just building up a repertoire really...at that stage.

**And very much, a very strong interest obviously more the piobaireachd than the light music side.**

So that took me through 1970, I went back to university on a part-time basis because I quickly realised that without an honours degree, you would not advance in teaching and at secondary level.

**Right, and that was of course, that was very much of its time and its place, that was it not? I mean, I think that...**

Yes. So Heriot Watt they were doing a sort of conversion degree, which was two years part-time and that was hard going, that was...three nights a week, three hours a time.

**And back doing maths...**

Teaching. And then the final year, when you got a secondment from your employing authority, so you did a full-time course, in your final year.

**Yes, so it must have been quite-it must have been very hard going.**

Yes and we had our first baby as well...

and it was quite hard, three nights a week and also having classes to prepare for and all the rest of it.

**Yes, did the piping suffer during that period.**

May be a bit. I don't think I did very much at that time. I was still going to Hugh but not much more besides that. Then that finished in 1973, for that course, I got the second graduation in 1973 and at the same time I got promotion when I was principal teacher at Alford Academy, which was back to...

**Oh back to [????] country, yes,...**

So of course, being up there and Hugh says, go and see if you can, he said go and get lessons from Bob Nicol. I remember once we got settled, well, we were just in a rented farm house to begin with, because it was at the height of the oil boom, houses were very hard to

get, there were no local authority houses. We managed to get a farm house to rent and I remember driving down to Ballater and finding out where Bob Nicol lived and drove out, just a couple of miles out of Ballater and there was snow on the ground, and there he was clearing snow from his path in front of his house, and I approached him and asked if he would be willing to give me lessons. He says, once this weather gets a bit better, just give me a phone and, so that was the start of tuition from Bob Nicol and that continued until more or less until his death, until he took seriously ill. He had very much the same style of playing as Hugh MacRae but a different way of teaching. Hugh would... he was much more... he would demonstrate on the practice chanter whereas Bob Nicol he would have the score in front of you and he would sing it, he did a lot of singing and where to emphasise, where to pull out notes, where to cut notes, to stay... and he would always say this tune's in 4/4 common time or 3/4 time. He always made a point of saying that...

**And was he speaking, kind of about pointing and things like that.**

The structure of the tune. You could see when he sang, you could see the 4/4 or the 3/4 time coming out, you could see where it all fitted in and then...

**It was very much...**

You need to cut that note, hold that note, bit longer, so that you get that rhythm, the rhythm in the player and to do with the pulsing of the tune.

**Yes, and I mean, I think you know the fashion obviously for writing piobaireachd is to write it without a time signature. Was he talking about a specific time signature or was he talking more about pulsing in phrases, do you think he was talking about...and four-four time.**

Also, more pulsing in phrasing it would be...because sometimes, the bar was probably in the wrong place, the bar line was just in the wrong place.

**Absolutely, and in fact the natural end of the phrase was somewhere else...**

Yes, one note into the next bar or something, that sort of idea.

**Do you think that that sort, that probably affected you, you know influenced your way of looking at piobaireachd and thinking about it tremendously?**

Very much so, and there were great subtleties in their playing, especially so with Robert Brown, listening to Robert Brown, although I never had lessons with him, although he very kindly sent me tapes of his playing, I think ten tunes he sent me. Brown was very subtle and I sometimes think with the Masters of Piobaireachd series which I think is a marvellous piece of work, unless you are able to listen very carefully and understand what Brown is doing that you end up maybe just not quite getting what he is actually doing.

**Yes getting the point of the subtleties...**

Yes.

**I mean would you be able to kind of give an example?**

Aye, if you take a tune like the End of the Great Bridge, so often you hear it [singing] but that is not actually elongating the E and cutting the Low G, but if you listen to both Brown and Nicol, it is not actually what they are doing. The Low G is still the theme note, Eeee and [singing] , that has become an Eeeeeee and [singing] and [singing].

**Right I see what you mean. I mean, correct me if I am wrong but with the Brown/Nicol version the G is almost a linking note rather than actually...**

Yes it is much shorter. They'll play it...oh that is the way that Brown and Nicol played it, but it was more subtle.

**Yes.**

Another one is the Prince's Salute. I heard a competitor play, a very good player, very good player [singing] and if you count that up, five beats in a common time bar, and I remember arguing with the judge, I said, "It's not right, what that competitor's doing, and he was not actually a Brown player. He said, "No that is the way Brown played it", and I said "I am sure it is not", so I went back and I had a tape and it isn't but it's the same sort of thing [singing], it is that introductory E. This competitor was playing it as a full crochet, when in fact it is a, shorter [singing] and one, two and three, four.

**There is your four pulses, it is your four pulses, so it is about, it is about having the introductory E, and that is an introductory E and not...**

No, cut short gliding off the E so that the low A is the predominant note, so little subtleties like that, but unless you are really listening very carefully, then you can just get the, slightly wrong end of the stick.

**Yes. So, in terms of your own playing at that point, obviously young family, promoted teacher, all the rest of it, competitions are not really.**

Well, aye I was beginning to...I was beginning compete round the games and...but it took me a couple of years, then I began to pick up prizes and I think my first good prize was at Braemar, I think that would have been about 1974, when I got fourth in the piobaireachd. It was a horrible day, and I think a lot of the really good players

**Were sheltering from...**

were venturing out into the rain to try their tune and then finding it was not a good idea...nevertheless, it just gave me a wee boost.

**Yes, absolutely.**

And then after that I began to, my repertoire, I learned a lot of tunes from Bob Nicol\*. He was a very inspiring teacher. I know, he has got the reputation with some as being a formidable grumpy man. I never found him that...I found him very straight, straight talking. He would tell you, you need to sort out that hiharin, you would need to sort it out, he would tell you, quite clearly what, technically, things if they were not right, or if your pipes could be better. He was a no messing about, very kind man, and very inspiring, as far as his teaching. When you left a lesson, you wanted to get home and practice it, learn it because that was his instruction. Take it away, get it learned, next time, you will play it on the pipes.

**And that was very much the pattern?**

Yes, yes on to pipes, and he would conduct. He would just sit in his chair and he would tell you if you were...beat out the time for you with his hand, and...he certainly licked me into shape, to a level where I could go and compete, with a reasonable chance of playing a good tune and perhaps winning a prize, so through the seventies, I did not compete a lot but I was picking up prizes and very rarely competing in light music. I would only compete in light music if it was a very small game and only a few people, just make up numbers and sometimes I would get a third or a fourth.

**It was not really...**

No. Piobaireachd was what I was really going to play.

**So, I mean, your competing career...seventies into the eighties, that sort of thing.**

Yes, through the 70s, I won some, some quite good prizes. I won at Lonach, and there was always a good field at Lonach. Where else did I win? I won Aboyne. Dornoch, Dornoch was my first first prize, that was in about '76, that was again, it was a small field but a very good field, so that was pleasing to do that. '77 I won at Lonach. That was probably my main maybe four or five games. I had also been entering occasionally for the Gold Medal, if I had the tunes, I would, but again I sometimes played ok, but never well enough to feature in any prize list.

**You need to play more than, better than okay.**

Yes, and then in 1977, they introduced the Silver Medal. In the first year, I played the Silver Medal, played all right, did not get the prize list and then in 78, in the Silver Medal, I did in get the prize list and the following year, I was upgraded to play in the Gold Medal. So, I played in the Gold Medal for up until, from seventy nine, I think I may be played five or six times in the Gold Medal and maybe three times, three or four of the times played quite well and you know and...

**Felt happy with it yourself.**

Yes, yes, I was never happy, I was always a very nervous competitor ...but people after the thing would say, that was good, you could be in with a shout, I was getting that sort of comment. The first time the Gold Medal was not good, pipes were not good enough, but after that...better and as I said I had a few fairly good performances and then the last time I played in the Gold Medal, it was not good, I only went halfway through the Desperate Battle...

**And things ground to a halt. The Battle got very desperate.**

So I decided then, I think that was '85 or '86. No, this is too much I am not going to do this anymore.



**Where were you career wise by this point, were you in Perthshire?**

No, no, I was still in Perthshire in '80, then the end of '82, I was promoted to Assistant Head at Crieff High School. So we moved to over to Crieff in the summer of eighty three and...Bob Nicol was dead...

**Yes.**

And I'd had.. My brothers, at the time were going to Jimmy MacGregor at Glenalmond, sometimes I would meet them there and just sit in with their lessons withn him, and Jimmy would want to hear me playing and he would make comment, you know. I also went to Hugh MacCallum for lessons, he was very helpful and also Andrew Wright. So. I was still still playing a bit in that time from '85 and then in about 1990, och I thought I'm going to have a wee go round the games again. So I did that, and again, I was pickingup prizes. I came seconds, thirds, fourths, it was that sort of thing and I thought, I will have a go at the Silver Medal, so I think that was 1990. So I played in the Silver Medal then, played okay, but then again not well enough to get on the prize list. After that I really stopped competing apart from the local mod in Aberfeldy, which was really just to keep the numbers...

**To support the...**

And it was then I started to do a little bit of judging.

**The Piobaireachd Society is something that you have been involved with, for a few years. When was your first involvement with that?**

That was after I retired and I went to over to the conference, to sit in on sessions. I joined at that stage and that was through Leslie Craig. I was judging with Leslie Craig at Taynuilt and at Tobermory, and it

was Leslie that said, “Have you thought about joining the Piobaireachd Society” and I said, “Well, yes, I have been thinking about it. How do I go about it?” and at that stage I needed two referees.

**Indeed, yes.**

So, Leslie was happy to be, if you like, my principal referee...Jack Taylor, he was the... So I joined and that would have, I think, about 2003, 2004 and it was either 2004 or 2005 that I had gone over to the conference which was in Birnam and there had been a general committee meeting, I think and I had been waiting outside for another session on after that. It was Jack that came out and said you have been proposed to be a member of the Music Committee. He said would you be interested. My first reaction was I do not think I am, sort of grand enough to be there. “Are you being serious, Jack?” “Oh yes”, he says, “you are not the only one that has been proposed.” I said, “Let me think about it.”

**Sure.**

So I found out who was on the Music Committee at the time, although I think it there were two who were retiring and I thought, well, I was not in awe of those who were on, put it that way. Great deal of respect but not awe and I thought, well, maybe I could contribute.

**Contribute something here.**

So, I said to Jack, yes. I would be happy for my name...this was a phone call, just three days later and then Jack phoned back subsequent to that, to say yes, I had been elected onto the Music Committee, which has been very interesting.

**Yes. The role of the Music Committee is really to look at the tunes for the various medals and things like that, or one of there.**

Or one of them, yes. I think that...I mean, it is an important role but it is certainly not the major role. I think there is a lot of work that goes on and Roderick Cannon was the forefront of a lot of it.

**Indeed.**

And Andrew Wright, looking into previous older publications, older manuscripts.

**I mean, Roddy's work has been phenomenal really.**

Seeing how things have evolved. And at that time Roderick had been working on a working on a proposed Book Sixteen. That book has been ongoing, he said I am just about there but there is so much still to do and I am involved in so many other things, so Andrew Wright, he suggested that while that was ongoing...Book Sixteen, Roderick's work on Book Sixteen, was ongoing...and that a group of us could look at a Book Seventeen, so it was Andrew and Alan Forbes and myself and we started searching through...G F Ross's book and Ceòl Mòr and manuscripts with tunes that had not been published in any books and began to put together a Book Seventeen. Now that Book Seventeen when Roderick's interests were elsewhere has now become Book Sixteen and it is fairly far along the way.

**To publication, so another major element of the Music Committee's activities.**

And you know, things like the website, recording of players.

**It is a tremendous resource, really. It is a tremendous resource. We have slightly digressed onto the Piobaireachd Society, and if you maybe just take a turn back with the judging, because you mentioned that very briefly, so that was really kind of the beginning of the 90s, that you started. Were you kind of pre or post boycott?**

I was... I had a great respect for Leslie Craig, and he joined the APA and he mentioned it to me and to me, I was not really aware of all the political issues that were enveloping this whole...I, quite naively I found out, I phoned John Burgess that I had got to know reasonably well. John had said yes, he said I will get Iain MacLeod send an application form to fill up the application form and send it back. So I did that and then I got a nice letter from Iain MacLeod with the constitution and code of conduct saying that I had been accepted and I thought that is nice, and it was only when , as things progressed that I realised, what have I got myself into here. This is ...People started resigning and Hugh MacCallum and Iain MacFadyen they went and Walter Cowan went and...

**And fairly major figures, really going...I mean, these are people who have won Gold Medals , Former Winners all these kinds of thing, yes.**

You know, when I think back to the constitution of the APA, the code of conduct, it was all very, very good but of course the stumbling block was that in the constitution it stated that you cannot judge with a non-APA member.

**Indeed.**

And that was really what prompted me to resign from it, because I had been asked to judge at Inveraray and my understanding was that it was to be judging with the other Border piper, a very good player he was, he stays in Annan...

**Oh right, I wonder who that was?**

I cannot think of his name just now...it will come back, but he had not turned up at the start of the competition, so Leslie who was convenor at the time, we were trying to get judges to get the competition started so he asked me to judge with Andrew Frater\* and I realised Andrew is not a member of the APA but I was not going to hold things up and

cause a problem, so I judged with Andrew...anyway as soon as I got home, I wrote my letter of resignation to the APA and then a year later or something, applied to the new judging setup.

**What sort of happened after that in term of the judging format, because it seems that APA was set up and then various folk left and then there is presumably it was the body which kind of exists now in the sense of....?**

I am not sure it still exists.

**I think it probably does, I mean there is, certainly speaking as a convenor, just        digressing slightly, there is a preferred list which as a convenor of a major games which you must use, but which I want to use it to have judges come to that and I think as the APA who run that, so it seems that, the body seems to have reconvened itself, so it seems that they still have a role to play...**

You know, I think , had they not had that clause in their constitution, I think that APA would have flourished. I really do. I think it would have become the main organisation regarding judging, but it was that they should not judge, they must not judge with non-APA members ...

**But there certainly seems to be a preferred list now, you know what I mean, that your name is on.**

But it certainly did, and I think this is a good thing. It raised awareness about all the issues surrounding judging of solo piping and it really made people sit up and think where are we going with judging. I think it really did engender a realisation that the whole issue of judging of solo piping had to be looked at quite seriously. With the boycott and the factions and the fractures that were caused by the APA. And it was really that issue about non-judging alongside non-members that really, I think, just you know blew the whole thing up. The organisers of the major piping events, they had to think about what was going on.

**Absolutely, and I mean I think as an organiser of...if I can say that, an organiser of a major piping event, having that list is one of the most useful things that you can have because I mean I think that from my point of view, I would not wish to have someone judging at Inveraray, particularly in the CPA competition, who was not a recognised judge on that list, it would be, I think, the Games would leave themselves open to criticism from a CPA and they would be quite justified, because I think that it is necessary that the competitors have confidence. You know, it is necessary have confidence that they are going to get, mistakes will be made, I think that, you know, people are human and so, obviously talk about, was Leslie kind of one of the first people that you judged with. Did you judge a lot with Leslie or...?**

Judged at Taynuilt, and the reason why I started judging at Taynuilt was actually through John Burgess who had been asked to judge at Taynuilt with Leslie but for some reason he couldn't so he phoned me and this must have been while I was still in the APA. Phoned me and asked if I would like to do Taynuilt, yes, that would be nice. So that is when I met Leslie. That was quite a friendship that grew up from that, and I judged at Tobermory, I think Iain Macfadyen at the time he had the job of getting judges together for Tobermory, I had a phone call from him and he said that Leslie had recommended me to judge with him at Tobermory.

**That is good. So, I mean your judging career has obviously carried on since then. Now, I mean in terms of your other playing has the Atholl Highlanders featured in your playing.**

Yes

**It would be interesting to hear a wee bit about that.**

Yes, indeed. Between Alford and Crieff, I was head of Maths at Breadalbane Academy which was in Aberfeldy. So not long after we came to Aberfeldy, I was invited to join Atholl Highlanders.

**And I take it one is invited to join the Atholl Highlanders?**

Yes it is that sort of an organisation. So Sandy Spence, he was the Pipe Major and up until then, I had no band playing, so it was a fairly steep learning curve and I do not know if ever really reached the top of the curve, but that was enjoyable.

**Was it?**

It was. There was an annual parade and then when the Atholl games, the Atholl Gathering was in Blair Atholl, when it was reconstituted and played at that and then in between they played the Keepers of the Quaich...

**Oh yes, the whisky industry's body**

And they always have a big gathering, the AGM or something at Blair Castle, their dinner, so played at that, played at various functions, sometimes, just a mini band and then there was a tour, the Atholl Highlanders went to the States, on the east coast of the States, played at various places, the town of Athol, I think marched right down to the town of Athol, with the Pipe Band and I think there was a US Army brass band played as well as the Athol Highlanders band, there was US troops marching with us as well, we were at a reception, played at the Embassy in Washington, and then not long after, a trip to Japan.

**It does not sound like it was a hardship?**

No. It was not. It was good. And a trip to Japan, which was nice. But I retired four or five years ago.

**From the Atholl Highlanders, so obviously keep up the contact and things.**

Yes, and then when I retired I joined the Comrie Pipe Band to keep playing. I started doing quite a lot of teaching, teaching pupils who...individually come to the house for lessons and then I remember my last review at school, the only target, I was given was to see if I could start a pipe band, but by the time I was deputy and that would be great, said the Head Teacher, if the school had a pipe band, and I said yes, it would, but it takes an awful commitment.

**It takes a long time and commitment.**

But anyway, when I retired, I had a young lad coming to me for lessons, Craig Sutherland, who was still at school, and he was also involved with the Vale of Atholl Pipe Band, a very good player and I said to him “How about trying to get this group going?” and we had a few pipers at the school together, played with one drummer...so I met with the headteacher whom I knew well and various others and decided that this would be a goer, so we got that set-up and started doing chanter classes and drumming classes and raise money to get uniforms and drums and so on, so that has gone quite well.

**That is going quite well, and you are still quite involved with that?**

When that started, by that time I had left the Comrie Band.

**How long have you been retired from teaching?**

Eight years.

**So that has really been the bulk of that time that you have been working with the band...**

And making bag pipes.

**Oh right, I did not know...**



I would not compete with MacCallums...

**No.**

Yes, in a normal year I will make half a dozen to nine sets, so I find that good as well.

**Yes, and a good hobby as much as anything else. Something nice at the end of it, and do you sell them?**

Yes

**So it is not a philanthropic activity**

Not entirely. [Laughter] I have a little business, Strathearn Bagpipes, you know, teaching and making bagpipes

**Yes, and judging and that kind of thing, that really makes up your piping life at the moment. So, in terms of just of overall involvement in piping, it sounds like it is something that has been very much a satisfactory part of your life?**

Oh, yes, it is something...if I had any regrets, it would be that I didn't try band playing a lot earlier than I did, that would be a small regret...

**Yes, something you found quite enjoyable.**

Yes.

**That is interesting. Well I think that has been almost an hour**

Is it really?

**Yes, it has. And I mean I think we have covered a lot of ground and I think we have spoken as well about a lot of people such as Hugh MacRae who tend to be forgotten nowadays, I think in some ways it is...**

You know when what's her name, the lady who wrote the

**Bridget MacKenzie.**

Hugh MacRae\* is not mentioned in that book which I find...

**He features in that famous photograph of the Queen's own highlanders former Gold Medal winners which was taken, I think, at the Northern Meeting round about nineteen seventy one or seventy two.**

That is right.

**With D R McLennan, Iain Morrison, Iain MacFadyen, John MacDougall and people like that, and I think he is very much a forgotten figure, I think**

Which is a shame because he, well I think he did a lot of work at the College of Piping and I think during the war years and perhaps afterwards as well, and he was Pipe Major actually, I am sure he told me he was Pipe Major of a band in Glasgow, I just cannot remember, he certainly did have a band

**That would be...**

Transport Band?

**There certainly was a transport band, and I think it was Glasgow Corporation Transport Band, I think now, I think Iain MacFadyen might have been involved with it when he was a younger man and there is somebody else, James Haugh, who I might think might have been involved with it, it would be interested to may be follow that up.**

I am sure Hugh mentioned that he had been, I think pipe major of a band and it could have been that one

**Of that...**

You know when he won his Gold Medal he would have been up in the north at Achnasheen of course he had a connection with Angus MacPherson as well. It was young Malcolm MacPherson they were

going to John McDonald throughout the same time, so he knew Angus fairly well, and he was a cousin to Jimmy and John Matheson from up that way. I don't know if you remember Jimmy Matheson, he took out an LP, I kind of remember...in the seventies, called the King of Pipers.

**Oh yes, obviously very much steeped in that piping tradition...**

John Matheson he lived in Bathgate. He had been a regular soldier and a pipe major in HLI maybe.

**So very much steeped in the piping tradition of that area. So well, as I say, thank you very much for your contribution to noting the tradition, that is, we have explored quite a few highways and bye-ways today, which has been very interesting, so on behalf of the Piping Centre, Ron, Thank you very much indeed.**

Pleasure.

And