



NOTING THE TRADITION

An Oral History Project from the National Piping Centre



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Stuart, have you had a life connection with piping?

Absolutely. I never ever thought for a minute that it would go down that road because my family were never involved in piping at all and it all came about through my older brother, Ian, who's four years older than me, he used to go to the Boys' Brigade and every year we would go and see the Boys' Brigade display in the church and at every point in the display the pipe band would come on and I remember sitting in the audience and I would have been about ten or eleven – I was still in the Junior Section but I wasn't in the Senior Section – and the pipe band came on and I'll never forget it. They came on with their brogues on and their spats and the Royal Stewart tartan and a big long hair sporran and just a white shirt, open at the neck, and they played up and down and looking back now it must have been quite dreadful as pipe bands go but I thought it was absolutely out of this world so I went home and as soon as I managed to get into the senior section I took up the chanter right away and I got into the band and I started learning tunes.

I was always ready to get my pipes and one of the boys in the band said I go to a private tutor that teaches me. He says he lives in Anniesland*, he's a chap by the name of Alistair MacPherson. Now Alistair was nicknamed Sandy, so Sandy MacPherson. Not Sheriff Sandy Macpherson but Donald's brother and he says he'll teach you for a fee. Oh, I says right, that'll be good. Give me that.

So my mother phoned him. I always remember my mother was at the phone and she was talking away and Alistair said – and I always thought it was a strange question – does he have long fingers and my mother said hold up your hands and she said well his fingers are reasonably long and he said, well, send him down. He said the fee is a pound an hour – a pound even in those days was nothing – so anyway, away I went to Alistair's and went into his son's bedroom and we sat down there in two chairs and he says, well, just play me a tune. Play me what you have. So I thought it was the big time so I thought I'll just show him what's going on here so I started off with Scotland the Brave and of course I didn't have any doublings, I didn't have any grace notes, it was just plain notes.

I think the Boys' Brigade they were so keen on getting people through the tunes as quickly as they can to build the band up so there wasn't much detail in the rudiments. Anyway, so he stopped and he said, well, he says you've been taught all wrong. I says I beg your pardon. I would only be twelve. He says you've been taught all wrong and we'll need to take you back to the scale. So that night we went through the scale. My mother came to pick me up and I was in tears by this time, tears streaming down my face, and my mother said how did you get on. I says, oh, I'm not going back there. I says there's no way I'm going back there. I says I could play tunes and he's put me back on the practice chanter. I says that'll no happen.

Anyway, I went home, I put the chanter into the wardrobe, forgot all about it. Next Thursday night my mum's putting on her make-up and she's doing her hair and I says where are you going. She says I'm taking you out. I says oh where are we going – are we going somewhere nice? She says no, you're going to this chap up at Anniesland. Oh, I says, suffering -- I forgot all about it. Grabbed the practice chanter, into the car, away up.

Show me what I taught you last week. Of course I hadn't been practising and he stopped. He was quite – he was a gentleman but he had this sort of always military presence, you know, with white hair, a big big head of white hair, and he sat there and he said, well, he says I can see you've not been practising. He says if you don't practice, he says, you're wasting my time, you're wasting your own time, your mother's time and more importantly your mother's money and I thought to myself, my mother's money. It's only a blooming pound you miserable old so and so. Anyway.

[Laughter]

So, tears again streaming down my face, mother comes to pick me up and I'm coming out the close and tears and she's saying what in the hell has happened there. I says I'm not going back. I'm not going back. So this happened another week and I forgot again and he said to me then, he says, last chance saloon. He says if you come back next week and you've not done a piece of work, just forget all about it. Well that got my back up so I went home and I practised every

night. Every night. Maybe twenty or thirty minutes on the chanter and I came back and he says show me what you've got and then our relationship just changed in an instant and he went, now you're talking. He says that's more like it.

So we went on and on. I went to him for weeks upon weeks and then in 1982 – that must have been four years later on – I won, and it's not in existence now, but it was called the World Juvenile Solo Piping Championship and I remember winning it. I was absolutely flabbergasted at winning it because I'd passed through the hall and because there was so many events going on it was held in Killoch school. They held the prize giving in the foyer of the hall and I was just passing by and I was drinking a can of juice at the time and now we're going to have the results. I had this can of juice up to my mouth and I was drinking out of it and winner of the World Juvenile Solo Champion 1982 under nineteen years is Stuart Shedden. Well, I had my mouth full of juice and it [sound]. Is that me! And my mother and father missed it. They were sitting up in the classroom. So everybody's applauding and I get this massive big trophy and I was just in a daze. I came up the stairs and my mother says what on earth is that you've got. I says I'm the world champion. She says in the name of heavens, can you believe that.

Anyway, so a couple of years after that I was still going up to Sandy and we were going out the door one night – I would be about seventeen by this time – and he tapped me on the shoulder and he went, see next week, he says don't come back. I was quite taken aback. I says what have I done to offend you. I must have said something or done something to upset you. He says not at all, he says, you're a far better player now than I ever could be. He says there's no point, he says I can't take you any further, he says but what you could do is go out and join a band and get to know better players and come back every two or three months so that we'll see that you're not going off the rails.

So that's how all that came about. So I always had a connection with the McPherson family and then when I was in my early twenties I kind of fell out with piping. I met my wife and I fell in love and I did

all that and I thought I'm not playing this set of stinky pipes, I'm going to go out with this marvellous looking beautiful woman and get married and did all that and then we went to the Games one day – Balloch Games – and I wasn't playing and it was a beautiful summer's day and I thought I'll sit and listen to the solo piping and the first one came up and I thought, jings, he's really not that clever, then the second one came up and I thought, jings, that chap's worse than the last chap and it went through like that and I thought, see if I'd have been playing today I think I'd maybe nipped a wee prize there so going back home in the car I said to Carol, my wife, see when I get home I'm going to get the pipes out. She said you're joking. She says they're up in the loft. I says I know, I've not played for two years but I've just the urge again.

So that's what I did and I got the pipes out. I phoned Alistair and I said I'm wanting to take this back up again, I says, and I'm really interested in piobaireachd and the only person I would ever go to was Donald because right from day one Sandy was awful proud of Donald and he said my brother is the greatest piper in the world and he said if you ever get a chance to go to hear him, do so because even just the sound out of his bagpipe alone he's got the rest of them beat before he blows a note and it was that kind of idiom that I was brought up on.

Anyway, so I phoned Alistair and I said would your brother take me on. Oh, he says he doesn't take pupils. I said would you ask him for me. He says okay, I'll ask him. So he spoke to Donald and he came back on the phone. He said well he's not willing to take you on board, he says, but what he would do, he says he would give the piobaireachd to me and I would in turn relay it to you and I thought I don't like that idea. Something could be missed along the road. I would rather get it direct from the horse's mouth so to speak. I says can you ask him again. He says I'll do that. Well it took four or five times, four or five attempts.

You were determined.

And eventually I got Donald's number and I phoned him and we're sitting there and I said I'd like to come down to the house and he says, well, you could come down and we could see what you're doing. He

says I'll give you directions. And he said I don't have a very big cottage here, it's only Curlew Cottage and it's only got two bedrooms but I suppose we could get a table and chairs out and we'd be able to do something.

Where was it?

Curlew Cottage was in Balbeggie, just north of Perth. In fact, the directions that he gave me were so precise because Donald was a perfectionist and he said when you reach the Isle of Skye Hotel, press the trip meter and he says my house, the cottage, is exactly five miles from there. And I always remember him saying that to be so precise – he says it's exactly five miles. So I was following the directions and the directions came and I was going down the road, a good country road towards the Curlew Hotel and it's just as you go over a dip you can see the Curlew Cottage on it and as you go over a dip you can see the cottage on the left hand side and at that point I looked at the trip meter and the trip meter said four point eight and I thought well it's not exactly five, it's only four point nineish. Well, as soon as I turned over the threshold of his driveway the trip meter turned from four point nine to five immediately and I stopped the car with two wheels turned after that up to the door and I thought how precise is that.

Had you met him before?

I'd met him on occasion when I was very very young and I knew him. Whether he would have remembered me I don't know but he knew I was one of Alistair's pupils. So that was the first meeting that I had with him.

We sat down and he said what tunes would you like to go through and I said well I've always been very partial to the piobaireachd – The Old Men of the Shells – could we learn that. He says certainly. He says that was the tune that I won the Gold Medal with. I says is that a fact. He says yes, he says, and I'll tell you what happened. He says we were sitting down – when you went through a lesson with Donald you never came in and put the pipes down and said, right, get the pipes out, let's go. He always allowed for fifteen minutes chat and the stories that he had for me were fantastic. I'll never ever forget

them and that's why important that some of them should be down on record.

So he said that was the first competition after the war, 1947, and he says I was sitting in the audience, there was three to go before I performed and I was looking at a chap playing on the platform and this chap was so nervous that every time he lifted his leg to take another pace his leg shook and Donald thought, jings, surely it can't be as bad as that up there. Anyway, he was sitting beside his father. Next minute, tap on his shoulder and the steward said are you Donald MacPherson and he says yes I am. He says you're on now. Oh, he says no, I can't possibly be on now, there's two or three to go before me. He says they've all scratched. He says you're on now. He says, well, he says, I was so embarrassed – what could I do – he says so I just got the pipe out of the box and I went outside in the street. He says no time to find a tuning room and he says I tuned the pipe up as best I could – I only took two minutes – he says I was caught short, totally embarrassed and he says I went up to the platform and Sheriff Grant was one of the judges and the first thing he said to me was why are you wearing the Balmoral of the Lovat Scouts and Donald said, quite truthfully, because it's the only one I have.

So the judge said, well, we understand you've been caught short so you can take an extra couple of minutes to tune. He says well I didn't like to so I went through the piece. I got the pipe going and I went through the piece and towards the end of the piece I was easing off on the chanter to match the drone and I was waiting for the choke to come and the choke never ever came and he says I got through and I went back to the ground and the pipe was just fantastic. Couldn't have went any better. So, he says, I wondered how I'd fare and he says lo and behold the results came out and I won the Gold Medal and he says you could have knocked me down with a feather. And he says my father was ecstatic and he says – Donald would be – 1922 he was born – he would be twenty four, he would be twenty five in the September and he says his father says you do not realise what you've done, he says, you've came here and you've won that on your first attempt. He says there's people that come here for a lifetime and never ever win it.

So that afternoon Donald won the Senior Piobaireachd as well, the Open Piobaireachd, with Queen Anne's Lament so that was when he did the double. But Donald never knew that his father played the pipes. When Donald would be about ten or eleven he was kicking about the streets, for want of a better word, with his pal and his pal was Donnie McGregor – the famous jig Donnie McGregor, he wrote that for his pal – and they're sitting the two of them at a loss and Donnie said what do you fancy doing tonight. He says I don't know. He says I'll tell you the Boys' Brigade, he says, they've got a pipe band up there. He says you fancy going to see the Boys' Brigade. He says aye we'll do that. So we went in and he says the band are tuning up and Donald says I was drawn to the drum right away – the snare drum – he says I got up and grabbed a stick and he got a sound out of it right away. Oh, he says, I went back home to my father and he said to my father I'm going to join the Boys' Brigade and his father said, oh good. He says I'm going to become a drummer and his father just looked at him. He says do they have a pipe band – he wasn't sure if it was a brass band or a flute band or whatever – he says do they have a pipe band and he says they do. He says, well, you're not learn the drum, he says, you'll learn the pipe and he says and I'll teach you. He says I had no idea that my father played. He says I didn't know. Because his father injured one of his fingers and he retired from piping and he just put the pipes below the bed and never played another note.

So that's what happened. Donald got taught by his father all that time and it just went from strength to strength. His father knew at a very very early age that he had something special because he would say to Donald I'll take you through this tune, away and learn it, and Donald would come back literally five minutes and say I've got that one Dad and his Dad would say well don't be so ridiculous, he says, you can't possibly have learned it in that time – play it – and he played it right through faultlessly so his father knew.

Yes. A couple of questions. The Boys' Brigade has been really important as far as piping is concerned. What group were you in yourself?

I was in the – it was called the 93rd Boys' Brigade. It was in Glasgow, it was in Bath Street in Glasgow and it was the massive church across from the Kings Theatre called Renfield St. Stephens.

I know exactly. It turned into Hope Street Free Church and now it's a centre.

That's right.

I remember it. I used to go when I was a student.

Well my father was very much involved in the church there, he was the Church Officer and in fact he had the flat above the church. He stayed there after my mother died.

Yes. I know exactly where you are. And where did you live then as a family?

Well, we were brought up in Wellington Street. My father was an amateur footballer. He was actually signed professional. He played at Wembley in the Scottish Schoolboys International with England and Scotland and when he came back he got signed by Partick Thistle and he was signed by Kilmarnock and when he was sixteen he took a job in The Royal Bank of Scotland in Bothwell Street, Bothwell Street/Wellington Street, right at the corner and he only took the job because it would give him money to go to games and to go to training but he took a horrendous injury on his knee and he was told by the surgeon that we can operate on the knee and it'll go either two ways – one, it'll be a success and you can continue with your footballing career or, if it doesn't go the way you want, you could end up walking with a limp for the rest of your life. So my father chose the latter and didn't go through with the operation, so much so that he stayed in The Royal Bank for the next forty years – he was employed there until he was fifty six – so we had the flat above the Bank.

So it was fantastic for the pipes because you could play to two, three, four in the morning and not a soul would hear you so it was great for that aspect.

And you could get the bus straight out to Anniesland Cross.

Absolutely, aye, used to do that. That's how we came up and the MacPhersons got together.

Well that's so interesting. What had brought Sandy MacPherson to Glasgow, was it his job then?

Yes. He worked with Allied Motors. He worked there. In fact at that time there was five brothers, the was John, Willie, Ian, Donald and Alistair – five brothers – and at that time Donald lived just behind Sandy in Bearsden.

So where did they all grow up?

They all grew up in Clydebank. They all grew up there and I think Donald continued to live there for a while but Donald he was a nomad. He would move – if you look at Donald's winds in the Clasp, if you look at the sort of former winners list it'll say Donald MacPherson, Clydebank then it'll say Donald MacPherson, Alexandria then it'll say Donald MacPherson, Wales then it's Donald MacPherson, Perth and he moved about all the time. He always got itchy feet but Donald, he always overcame the most extreme adversity and I'll tell you a story.

When Donald was – he was a bomb navigator in the war in the RAF and he was out training in Africa. He never ever saw any action but he was telling a story that just before they were about to be demobbed he went into the hospital to see his friend and his friend was lying – he'd been injured – and he was lying in the hospital bed and Donald's gear was all packed up, his bed was made, his suitcase was packed, he was just going home to grab his case to get onto the wagon to be demobbed to go back home. This would be late 1945.

So he was in the RAF.

Yes. So he's up visiting his pal and his pal says it's alright for you, you're going back home, I'm stuck here in this bed and Donald said it'll not be that bad, he says, you'll be home before you know it. Anyway, he says, we went out and he says it was a terrible night. He says it was bucketing – raining cats and dogs – and he says we went in to this – this army chap said are you going back to the billet – and

there was three of us, there was two guys from the RAF one of which was Donald and another army chap and he says, well if you hop in the back of this wagon I'll give you a run home.

So they're in the back of the wagon and it's raining cats and dogs and Donald turned round to the other chap in the RAF and he said he's going a bit cheerie. The chap was driving pretty fast. Anyway did he not – he hit a ditch and the three of them, because it was a canvas top, were thrown out the back and Donald landed on his arm and as he landed on his arm he hit his head and he was concussed and when he woke up the soldier that was taken beside him fell and broke his neck – he was dead – so would you believe the next morning Donald's in the bed beside his pal to say, well, you thought I was going home and would you believe that, I'm stuck in here beside you now.

Now that kept Donald back for about eight months to nearly a year before he got back home again and it was so bad that I don't know if you ever noticed Donald, Donald could not bend this arm at all, his left arm.

I knew there was something about his arm but I didn't know – so that's what it was.

And that's why he always walked with his hands clasped in front of him so that it wouldn't look odd. Now, it so happened that it ended up there was a trapped nerve in here and it never ever got repaired. Donald went for advice and they thought well we could go in there and sort of rummage about but we could do more harm than good so to overcome that a lot of people would have said well stuff that then if it's pretty uncomfortable to play the pipes then I'll not bother but Donald overcame all that and he had bags specially cut for him and he overcame it and it only ever affected him – he told me it only affected him twice when he was in competition and he got a twinge.

Now he said when you got the twinge it was like an electric shock and he had to stop. He says a couple of times it would catch me out if we were emptying the car of shopping, messages, and I went to pick the messages up. He says I would get the jar and I just left it.

That's interesting.

He did that a lot. He overcame a lot of adversity there.

Of course he saw the war but he didn't see any action.

No, he didn't.

And pipes would have had no place in the war either, he was in the RAF.

No. He signed up – it was entirely voluntary that he signed up. He didn't wait to get drafted and he was quite keen and I think he took the practice chanter with him but he would just tootle away on the chanter.

Growing up in Clydebank he was probably in a pipe band before the war.

Shepherd Pipe Band.

Was he?

Aye. I think the pipe major's name was, and I might be wrong, Archie MacPhedran I think his name was and all Donald could talk about was his language because he says this chap could "F" and "blind" and "F" and "blind" this and all the words that I'd never even heard of before and he said but he had a way of doing it that he got away with it, you know. You weren't shocked at it. Whether it was because you were in his company for that long and you were just used to it but he loved the pipe band.

Do you know, it might be I think okay for me to tell you an anecdote that matches in with this. It's amazing. The piping world, as you know, is so small that before long you know that gosh I've shaken almost the second hand from everybody you know. My dad grew up in Knightswood which is right next to Clydebank, and was in a BB Band. Well actually he grew up in Wellfield Street in Springburn and then he moved to Knightswood and it was bombed as well during the blitz but before the war he got to a decent standard and he began to – he was in the Clan Fraser Pipe Band.

Right.

They did okay, I mean they got a gold at Cowal which I suppose says they half... and he had a gold. Anyway, before the war – this by the way I'm telling you because I always wondered why somebody with the amount of knowledge of piping that he had and knew Willie Norris as one of the teachers and Donald MacLeod and Donald MacLean, they were all his piobaireachd teachers, and why he never taught. I just couldn't understand that, you know. Why not pass that on. My generation was missed out. He never taught.

I'm not saying it irked me but I just wondered and eventually I said so tell me about this pipe band. My dad was born in 1917 and war declared in 1939 and was in the very next day or the same day, the Army and he said before the war he said I trained. That was my pride and joy he said. Twenty two pipers and there was a drum corps and he named the guy who did the drum corps and he said these boys I took them from nothing and they could play. He said I was so proud of them and of course very military and he said we were doing okay then he said at the beginning of the war there was nineteen of the pipers joined up and he was one of them and he said, well, I'll tell you what, at the end of the war we'll be back in that drill hall the very first – it was a Thursday or something like that – we'll be back in that drill hall he said and we'll pick up the band. He thought it might be months. Six years later three of the pipers were alive.

That's incredible.

And he said he was just traumatised. He had a really rough time in the war anyway but he said the very thought that I trained nineteen pipers for only three of them to live and he said I vowed I'd never teach anybody to play the pipes again.

Really.

Isn't that amazing.

I can totally sympathize with that for I've got my own band now as well but in that time to have that size of band, twenty two pipers, is absolutely huge at that time.

I've got photographs of them.

Wow.

I do. And I must give them to the project. I haven't told James this because he thinks my connection to piping is through Martin. No. It's through my father.

I always think it's unfortunate for a lot of these chaps because a piper's career is, what have you got, twenty, twenty five years – I don't know – unless you're Donald MacPherson who had six decades but to miss out.

If you take Donald as the prime example, he would have been seventeen when the war broke out and he wouldn't have got back to it until he was twenty five so there was eight years that's really when you're learning your trade and you're in prime but for Donald to win that Open Piobaireachd in the forties, the fifties, the sixties, the seventies, he never won any in the eighties and then to win it in 1990 that's just – .

That was incredible. 1990 he was way up in years.

In 1990 he was sixty seven going on sixty eight. That was his last performance.

I wonder how many competed at that age.

Well, I think Willie MacCallum or Colin MacLellan was second to him that day. I know Willie MacCallum because he sent me a message to say I've got the honour and privilege to say that I actually competed against him. I competed but I wasn't in the same platform as Donald at that time. I was still competing in the Silver Medal while he was in the Clasp but I remember meeting him at the Games and saying well how did you play and things like that.

I think the longevity – the thing about Donald MacPherson was a lot of people say, well he practised three hundred and sixty five days of the year. He never did any of that at all. He was the laziest midden on this planet because it would come the summertime and he'd be out cutting the grass and think, oh jings, it's kind of heating up a bit now, the Games must be coming round. I better dig the pipes out.

And that's what he would do, he would dig the pipes out and I used to say to him so you would have had maybe six or seven months that you hadn't played then and he said yes and I said what did you do then, did you play jigs and hornpipes. He says what do you mean? I says well to get the fingers back in action again because you've – he says I don't understand what you're saying. I says well surely you wouldn't have been the same player that you were six or seven month ago if you've not played in all that time. He says and why wouldn't I be. And he couldn't understand that. And he wasn't being smart or being funny, that was his genuine – .

Yes. It may be something to do with what they now call muscle memory.

Very possibly.

Where it's become such an intricate part of your very inner being that it's going to be back unless something else intervenes.

Well, what he did say to me was I had a gap for six years when I was sort of learning the piano and just – the whole piano thing came about because the three girls played, Heather, Catriona and Fiona.

That's his daughters.

Yes. And when they were up in Clydebank they got sent to a private tutor. Now, if you didn't give the tutor twenty four hours notice that the lesson would be cancelled you had to pay the fee. Now Heather wasn't well and about eight hours before the lesson it was quite clear that she wouldn't make the lesson the following day so Donald went up with the fee, chapped the door and said Heather's not coming and the gentleman put out his hand for the fee, Donald gave him it and he

was about to shut the door and Donald said, well, wait a minute. I've paid for a lesson – teach me – and that's how that came about.

That's wonderful, isn't it?

And Donald took to that. Now Donald used to say to me, he says, rather than have a tune on the pipes, I'm quite happy to sit down, in his words, honk away at the piano. Now I never heard Donald play but I doubt very much that he would've honked away at any piano.

So he took six years of a gap and he was quite interested in the piano then and he was telling me that he'd entered for the Clasp at Inverness and because he hadn't played in such a long time the only difficulty he had was the umbrage with his lips so he couldn't take the pressure of the pipe and he kept [noise] blowing over so he started with no drones, just the chanter, then brought in one drone, the second drone and then the day before the Clasp that was when he managed to take the pressure of the third drone.

You raise a really good point. It's not the fingers that need the exercise only, it's the lungs, the diaphragm, the lips, the cheeks. It's everything.

Yeah, the memory for the tunes, everything.

Yes, it's everything. It's actually a big workout.

If you think about adversity, Donald ever only – it's a terrible word – threw up or vomited twice in his life. Twice in his life, right. Once was when he had the flu and I was going to him and he drove up from Wales and he no sooner got into the house to find it was burgled than he went through and he was ill and at the bathroom. There was that time and the other time he went to Inverness to play in the Clasp and the day before the Clasp I don't know whether he'd eaten something or something disagreed with him but he went to his bed in the bed and breakfast and beside his bed he had the ghillie brogues and he had his hose, his kilt hose inside the ghillie brogues. Well he'd been ill during the night and he brought up all over his brogues and he thought, well, what am I going to do now because that's the only pair I've got so he says I got up the morning and he says I just went into

the bathroom and put the whole lot in the sink, brogues, socks, the lot, flashes, he says, and washed them as best as I could. No time to dry them, put them on wringing wet, put the shoes on wringing wet, he says, and I went to play in the Clasp and he says as I was walking round in the performance I could see the wet footprints on the stage and he says, would you believe, he says I won the first prize that day and I thought, oh.

[Laughter] On eccentricities.

A midden – with the burglar. When I won the Medal – Donald’s tippie was Glenmorangie – he always loved Glenmorangie – so when I won the Medal I bought a bottle of Glenmorangie and a bought a gold brooch for Gwen so I went up with the gifts and I had the Medal with me and he was absolutely so pleased for me, he was delighted for me. I’ll never forget it. I gave him the Glenmorangie and he said to me that’s very kind of you, he says, there was absolutely no need to that. He says I’ll have a dram out of that tonight and I says, oh, you’ll have a dram out of that tonight. I says do you not have any other bottles in the house that you could open. He says, no, every bottle I get, he says, I take the neck out it. I says and why is that. He says I would not give the burglars the benefit of an unopened bottle.

[Laughter]

So he took a dram out of every – .

Oh that’s so funny. That’s a really good line, isn’t it. What was he doing in Wales?

In Wales he went to live with his daughter, Heather. Heather married a chap called David and I can’t remember David’s surname now but David was a very clever man. I think he worked with the Police at one point to do psychological profiles on people. He was a very very clever man. Now Donald had the utmost respect for him. In fact, he used to describe David and his words were – and I’ve told David this myself at the funeral – he described him as a fine specimen of a man. He says six foot four, broad. He says look at me, he says, I’m barely five foot, he says, I’m a wee shuffler of a man, he says, and this chap had the stature and he always got on famously with David.

So when they had a big house down in Wales Heather suggested that Gwen and Donald come and stay with them and live with them so that's what they did.

Did he have another career besides piping?

He was an engineer. He worked in – you might know it – the Barr and Stroud at Anniesland. He worked in there for many many years.

Did he? Did he have a specialisation in engineering?

I know that he was on the shop floor. I'm not sure if he was a foreman or not but I'll tell you another story, he worked for Singers, the sewing machine company.

A mechanical engineer then.

Yes, it was always engineering that he did and he worked for Singers and if Oban and Inverness came about he didn't get many holidays during those days so Donald kind of pretended he was sick and he said every Monday morning when he went back if you were off the week previous you had to line up the foreman's desk and you lined up at the foreman's desk to explain why you were off.

So the chap in front of him was saying what's your name and the foreman saying Willie Tam. Right, and why were you off? Well I was off Wednesday there and I was off Thursday. What was up with you? Tummy bug. Right, okay.

So it was Donald's turn and the chap's sitting with the pen and paper and Donald had just won the open Piobaireachd and the chap is writing the names down on top of the Oban Times and Donald McPherson is on the front cover of the Oban Times after winning the open Piobaireachd .

[Laughter]

So the chap's got the piece of paper over the photograph of Donald. Donald's none the wiser. He doesn't even know he's in the paper. So he comes up and he says, your name. McPherson, Donald. Aye and you were off Wednesday and Thursday last week. What was your

problem? Bad tummy upset. Right you are. And he wrote it down and as he wrote it down he put the paper out like that and Donald saw the paper and he never said anything, he just sort of walked away and I think this was the foreman saying to him, I know exactly where you were. Don't let it happen again.

That's more powerful than speaking, isn't it.

Absolutely. So he got away with that one.

[Laughter] Oh, that's so funny. He'd such a long colourful life. What an influence he had on other people.

Without doubt. When you think of the medallists that he taught. Tom Speirs went to him for a length of time and then a generation later Ian Speirs went to him, then myself. He always blamed me.

This is what happened. He says you were – because when I started and I started getting in the prize list people would say oh there's Shedden, he's turning up and he's in more or less every week. I wonder what his secret is. And they would say who's teaching you now and I'd say Donald MacPherson. Oh right, I'll keep that in the back of my mind, and before you know it Ian Speirs were going, a lot of youngsters were going, Jimmy and Dougie Murray were going and Donald used to say he would only do the teaching Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and he would say, that's me, I've got another pupil lined up now, he says, it's like a bloomin' conveyor belt and he says I blame you. It's all your fault he says because he would never had anything to do with teaching at all.

Would this have been in the eighties?

That would be – after I spoke to Don in 1989.

Oh, that's almost the nineties.

October 1989 until March 2009 – twenty years, every week, but I was the only one that went every week.

And did he charge you a fee?

Well, that was the funny thing because the very first – I got married in the April of '89 so in the October of '89 I phoned Donald up and he gave me directions to the house and about the trip meter and it's five miles and I was about to put the phone down and he said, oh, he says we haven't discussed a fee. I says, right. He says well I think ,if I'm being honest, I think twelve pounds an hour would be a reasonable fee. I was just married and I was a bit taken aback and I said to him, well, if that's the case Donald I'll need to discuss it with my wife – can I phone you back. And my mother was in the house at the time.

So I put the phone down and Carol said – my mum said how did you get on. I says great, I says, but well there's not much point, it's twelve pounds an hour. I know that sounds a menial fee and I had a good job at the time but we were just married and we didn't have a stick of furniture, we were sitting on orange boxes, we were paying up suites. The only reason I had a television is I won it in a sales incentive. It was a fourteen inch portable. It was all that stuff. I'm not trying to say that I was poor but I had no expense.

I know exactly what you mean.

So, I says there's no point, I can't go and my mother said don't be so ridiculous. Phone the man back. I'll give you money. And my mother gave me the money for twelve pounds every week of my life up until maybe a couple of years later on and I could sort of fend on my own two feet.

Had your dad died by that time?

No, my dad was still alive.

No, your dad was still in the background.

There's a story about that that I'll get to in two minutes. It's a fabulous story. Anyway, so it stayed at twelve pounds for seventeen years or something, right, because he never ever put it up and it was me that came to him and I said what would happen would be if I didn't have a ten and two singles I would give him a ten and a five and it was always awkward and Donald said, well, wait a minute, I don't know if I've got change. Gwen have you got three pound coins.

And it came to that and it was a sort of standing joke and at one time I said, listen, it's been twelve pounds for the last seventeen year. I think we're due an increase – we'll go for fifteen – and he stopped and he looked at me and he said, well, I'll take your fifteen pounds, he says, however, if the pupils that come behind you are not willing to pay fifteen pounds, he says I'll give you three pounds back next week. So that's the only reason that he would have put the fee up is – .

Yes. A sense of fairness.

Aye, very fair, isn't it. Extremely.

Yes, yes. Although he grew up in Clydebank, where were these MacPhersons from originally or do you know?

His father was from the Black Isle as far as I'm led to believe. That's all I know. I know that his father was from the Black Isle and then Donald came down and stayed in Springburn.

Springburn?

Sorry, I beg your pardon, Clydebank. He stayed in Clydebank and when he was in Clydebank he used to go to work daily and he told me a story one time that they all lived in a tenement. When he came home Heather was crying and apparently what had happened is Heather would only be very very young – three or four – a toddler and when they were out they'd had an altercation with one of the other daughters and this couple or family lived on the bottom floor. I think Donald was either one up or two up so Donald went down and chapped the guy's door and Donald said he was a big guy, he says, but if it was coming to fisticuffs I wasn't bothering, he says, because nobody's going to hit my daughter. I'm not sure if the father had slapped the daughter or slapped Heather or if it was the daughter that had slapped Heather – some altercation happened and Donald was having none of it so he went round and he chapped the door and gave the chap a piece of his mind and said if that ever happens again, this, that and the next thing.

So Donald thought no more about it and he went out to his work and he came back in and there was a group of men standing at the close

and they start going, aye, you're not so smart now and this, that and the next thing. Well Donald said I just rushed past them and I ran up the two flights and they're all coming behind me and he says there's eight or nine of them and I shut the door and the next thing they're battering the door. McPherson show your face. Show your face. He says well I went up to the door and he says the coal bunker was at the door and he says and I opened the coal bunker and the axe was beside the coal bunker and he says I lifted the axe and he says I threw open the door and I'm standing with the axe and I said to them the first one to pass the threshold gets the axe in the head and he says I would have. He says, I'm telling you I would have went inside, he says, I would have hit them. So it all sort of petered out then and they all walked back down the stair but, aye, he was no slouch at that.

No, and his generation too though, Glasgow, he'd been through a war, you had to look after your own.

Well, Donald all through his RAF life he was a boxer – he boxed. Did you know that?

No.

He boxed down in London in the finals and the reason that that happened was his father's job was mending the steeples all over Glasgow, right, and Donald wasn't one to – if anybody said anything to Donald although he was a wee guy he wasn't shy. He would just say well I'll just see you at the gates at four o'clock and we'll just sort this out with the fisticuffs.

His father was up mending a steeple and it was overlooking the school playground in Clydebank and he saw Donald with the jacket off squaring up to this chap with the fisticuffs and when he came back home that night his father was sitting at the kitchen table and his father said to him, how was school today? He says, fine. And his father said to him, I saw you in the playground and Donald knew exactly what had happened. He said, see tomorrow, come with me to my work.

So Donald went and they were doing the steeple at Glasgow Cross and he was doing the clock and all that and then they went down to

the Trongate and his father said to him, come on we'll go for a refresher. So his father went into the pub with Donald – Donald would only be about twelve, thirteen – and he brought Donald in and his father, Ian, said to the barman, I'll just stick the boy in here at the side, eh, and the barman said – didn't have the rules that we have in those days – aye, that's fine, just leave him at the side.

His father went up to the bar to get a drink and Donald's looking about the bar at the Trongate and there's all photographs of boxers and here, just above Donald's head as he turns round is one of his father stripped to the waist in the pose like that.

[Laughter]

So his father came back and sat down at the table with the dram and Donald said, is that you. He says, aye. He says, I saw you at school the other day. He says, I think you and I need a few lessons. So he taught him how to box.

Now, Donald wasn't that keen on the boxing, right, but whatever happened when you moved the billet they'd all be standing up in line and the regiment sergeant major there would be saying, right, any footballers – can anybody play football – and a couple of boys put up their hand. Well I can play football and I can do this or I can do that. Anybody good at, I don't know, snooker or table tennis. Right, you – right, we'll put you down for that. Anybody boxing and he said it would aye be my pal at the side of me – aye, MacPherson can box – and Donald would turn round and say what did you tell him that for. Och, he says, you'll be fine. You're good at it. And this is what used to happen.

That's hilarious.

Donald hated to box but he says I always got brought into this.

I hope you don't mind me taking a note of this

Not at all.

I just wish – sorry I missed the boxing post. I just looked at the clock and this has flown like the clappers and I've to meet James

at ten but thank you very much. I can't say that this will be the last time because I hope it won't be.

Well can I tell you two more quickly.

Oh yes. [Laughter]

Because I remember going to Cowal. I won the piobaireachd at Cowal and I can't remember when it would be – somewhere like 2002, 2003 and it's a massive shield that they give you and the shield's in tatters, it's all chipped and worn because the first name that's on it is Willie Ross, right, so it's a nice one to have.

Very nice.

So that was on the Friday and I'd won it and I'd put the trophy in the boot and coming home I'd taken the pipes out of the back of the car – the pipes never went into the boot, they pipes always went into the back seat in case somebody ran into the back of you.

Of course.

So I put the pipes in the car. I'd forgotten all about the trophy. I went to Donald's on the Monday and as I put the pipes back in the car I had to go round to get something out of the boot and I saw the Cowal, the trophy, and I went, oh Donald. I brought it back into the house and up to his driveway and I said there's the trophy for Cowal. I says your name's on it five times and he just looked at me and went, I only went five times. To say this is the kind of thing.

[Laughter] Oh, my word, yes. Modesty or the art of the understatement. You've probably got lots – .

Aye, I've got stacks.

I know and you've got other stories about other pipers too, wee Donald etc., so I hope that you might be up for doing some of the others.

Absolutely. Aye, I enjoy this.

It's fantastic. Maybe we'll up to the next one in Robroyston and you can come and sit on my orange boxes.

Aye.