



NOTING THE TRADITION

An Oral History Project from the National Piping Centre



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Interviewee Walter Cowan

Interviewer James Beaton

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**Project Manager
Noting The Tradition
The National Piping Centre
30-34 McPhater Street
Glasgow
G4 0HW
jbeaton@thepipingcentre.co.uk**

This is James Beaton for Noting the Tradition. I'm in Annan at the home of Walter Cowan, piper, pipe major and now leading judge and we're here and it's the 24th of October 2012.

So Walter, welcome to Noting the Tradition and thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us this afternoon.

Thanks very much James for inviting me. Quite an honour I'm sure.

Well thank you. What I'd like to do really first of all is go back to the beginning of your piping career. Where did you start? How did you start playing and how did that all come about? Was there piping in the family?

There was but it doesn't go back a terribly long time. My father started playing or being taught I would think in the late 1930s before the outbreak of war and he joined the KOSB and into the pipe band and was given tuition by Willie Bryson who I'm sure many people will remember as a first class player, composer and pipe maker. A former pupil of Bobby Reid. The pipe major of that band was John Slattery, the father of John Slattery who most of us know as pipe major in the Scots Guards.

Indeed. Yes.

So I got my initial tuition from my father but I had an uncle, my father's brother, same name as myself, who was a player and he become pipe major in the Scots Guards during the war and the reason his name is not in the Scots Guards book seemingly was because he was made up as a conscript or something to do with that anyway.

Right. A kind of temporary thing.

Aye. And then I had another uncle, George Grant, who married my father's sister and he was a pipe major in the Scots Guards at the same time as Peter Bain. My uncle George went on to be pipe sergeant in the Edinburgh City Police under Donald Shaw Ramsay and he in turn emigrated to Canada, became a pipe major in the Royal Canadian Air Force Pipe Band somewhere in Ottawa and he died, as every piper should, playing on the boards in Canada. He actually took a heart attack while he was playing and for want of a better expression, snuffed it. [Laughter] I think that's the way a piper should go.

Yes, well, we need to go at some point and that's a good – .

I don't know the tune that he was playing.

Not a long history but quite a broad history in terms of uncles and so on and your dad and stuff like that who were involved in it. Was there a lot of piping in Annan at that point really kind of in the immediate post-war period?

Well there was the Annan British Legion Pipe Band. Before the war it was the Annan Pipe Band but after the war it became the Annan British Legion Pipe Band and my uncle Walter was the pipe major. My father was pipe sergeant and that's where I started my pipe band career.

I started being taught in 1946, end of 1946, and my first outing with the band was at a Christmas Eve concert in one of the big local garages run by the Rotary Club or something. I can remember that. That was my first appearance with the band.

And were you doing junior solo competitions at this point as well?

I was, yes.

Locally or elsewhere in the country?

Mainly locally. I won my first prize ever in a trio competition in Newton Stewart. I played with another couple of guys in the band and we won it and that was in 1948 and the judge that day was pipe major Archie MacPhedran of the Glasgow Shepherds.

Indeed, yes. A man with Argyllshire connections obviously. I think the family were originally from Loch Fyne side. There were a lot of MacPhedrans round about Inveraray. We'll come on to talk about Argyll at some point in the future.

That Glasgow Shepherds had some very famous players in, John MacFadyen.

Yes indeed. Donald MacPherson. Absolutely, yes. It was a big junior band I think before the Second World War. Would I be right in saying that?

Aye, I thought so.

So were you of an age to have done National Service or anything like that?

I was but there's a wee story attached to that. I used to suffer quite badly from migraine headaches and when the time came about to go for my medical I had a letter from the doctor which I forgot to take with me and I passed my medical. The guy that was doing the interviewing was a sergeant major or RSM, Speakman. He won the VC in Korea and he asked me what my hobbies were and I said oh, I play the pipes. So you'll be going to join the KOSB pipe band, you'll hope to join it. I says no. I says I want to join the Cameron Highlanders. Why? I said because they have the best pipe band in the British Army at present. And who told you that? My father told me that because Ian McFadyen, John Dee and John McDougall were there at that point. What sort of authority is he? I says well

he was a piper in the KOSB and he just shut up immediately, as soon as I mentioned KOSB, but I went back home and of course my mother she wasn't too pleased that I'd forgotten to take this letter so I'd to submit the letter to the authorities and I was downgraded to grade B or C or something.

So that was it.

No army career.

No army career for you.

I rue that, sometimes I really wish that I'd been able to go.

Yes. Well certainly the Cameron Highlanders had quite some band. Yes, aye. I suppose that continued with the Queen's Own once it going as well.

However, I did have an army career as such.

Oh yes, aye. Yes, I'll ask you a wee bit about that because I was thinking more in terms of talking – well you've obviously been through the juniors with pipe band and then into senior competition. And when did you start your playing in the seniors?

Well I'd really had two goes at the senior competition. When I was about nineteen I had just started to compete professionally with, I must admit, a limited amount of success.

Right, sure. Who were the kind of people you were coming up against at that point?

Iain MacFadyen, John MacDougall, John Burgess, guys like that. And the band was starting to interfere with it and I became pipe major of the band quite young and after a while of being pipe major I thought I'm going to have another shot at this solo

piping so it was in the 1970s, early 70s I started again. I must admit I had put a lot of work in and I had a reasonable amount of success. Again, these guys were still there of course – Burgess and Iain.

Yes, uh huh. And that of course culminated in winning the Marches, Strathspeys and Reels at Oban and then moving into the Former Winners after that.

That was the year – 1982 was the year that Evan MacRae won the Gold Medal at Oban.

Indeed, yes.

It was great. It was good. Colin Drummond and I, the late Colin Drummond, a very dear friend of mine, he and I trekked over all the games round the country and really had some good fun. We took it seriously of course but enjoyed ourselves.

Yes.

Met many many good friends. Sadly quite a few of them are away now but that's life.

And of course it was light music that was your focus really.

Yes. That's my one big regret that I used to go when I was young – in my early teens I used to go to Edinburgh for tuition from Willie Bryson and I used to leave Annan on the service bus, go to Dumfries, change the bus Dumfries to Edinburgh, arrive in Edinburgh at mid-day, half past twelve, Willie would pick me up, we'd go down to Sinclair's at Leith where Willie worked as a pipe maker, get a couple of hours tuition, get the bus at five o'clock back to Dumfries and it was ten o'clock on a Saturday night by the time I got back.

I done that for a good couple of years and I was doing reasonably well but I just wasn't ready to compete. Just the way things happened but I did once win a prize at a piobaireachd competition. I got second prize to Hugh MacCallum at a TA camp. There's a story attached to that.

It was called the Brigade Cup. It was the 7th Argylls, 8th Argylls and another – I can't remember the other battalion – and the judges that day were Ronnie MacCallum, General Freddie Graham, the general with the two tone mustache, and Major Smith of the Seventh Argylls.

Yes, I remember seeing him when I was a wee boy and being a bit – .

He was a very very smart gentleman.

Yes, and being a bit scared by him really. [Laughter]

And he was sitting in the middle as well [laughter]. And Hugh obviously won that day and I got second because there was seven guys played and I Got A Kiss of the King's Hand and I broke down just at the beginning of the crunluath, but the reason I got second was I got further through my tune than the other five guys so I got second. And I've got a wee cup somewhere in the house that I cherish. My piobaireachd prize. Second to Hugh MacCallum. That's some going.

That is some going, yes. Absolutely, yes. So with Willie Bryson it would be just light music then with no piobaireachd at all.

No, it was piobaireachd.

Oh it was piobaireachd, right. So who were you doing your light music with at this point?

My uncle, George Grant. Again in Edinburgh.

In Edinburgh. Yes, aye. So was that again another Saturday trek?

Well I used to go up there for holidays.

So there was really no opportunity locally for you to get tuition.

Nobody down here that taught piobaireachd.

Or even – well, was there much in the way of light?

No, there was only my father. My uncle did a wee bit but his job didn't allow him, the type of job he was in but no, that's where all the tuition came from in these days, with my father.

Aye, and having to go up to Edinburgh to see your uncle and stuff like that. A fair old trek.

It was. In these days with the buses, you know. I took two and a half hours from Dumfries to Edinburgh.

For goodness sake. And of course at this time you would be doing your pipe band stuff in tandem with that. So was the pipe band going when you took it on or did you have to kind of start it up?

I took it over and we were in Grade Three.

So when would this be about?

This would be about 1970 ish.

Right. Early 70s.

Early 70s. Previous to that we had a decent spell. We won the Ayrshire Dumfries and Galloway Championship two years on the trot. The first time it had ever been done by a band outwith Ayrshire. And then there was a decline in the band when I got it. We were Grade Three and the first competition was the World's Championship in Grangemouth and we were last.

Right.

We went to Cowal two weeks after and we improved it – we were third last.

That's a steady rise.

Right. We were going to start from scratch – go down to Grade Four and start.

And did you have to change personnel and stuff like that or did you decide to stick with the guys that you had?

Well stick with most of them but we'd a big drumming problem. It was like piobaireachd tuition down there. Drumming was backwater. We were a couple of years in Grade Four and we won the Champion of Champions. Up to Grade Three and then we got – the first guy to help us out drumming wise was Bob Turner who was the leading drummer of Muirheads with Bob Hardie. He helped us.

We progressed from there up to Grade Two and I'd a good run at Grade Two. By this time Bob Turner had went out to the Middle East to teach and Tom Brown from Boghall helped us out with tuition. We were doing quite well and then a guy, Norrie Thomson, who was the leading drummer with the Red Hackle came to teach in Dumfries so he joined the band as leading drummer.

Ah, right. So that would be a big step up for you. This was Annan Ex-Service...

We changed the name to Annan Ex-Service. And in 1986 we won the World's Championship at Bellahouston and up to Grade One.

How did you find that? I think you hear people sometimes saying this step Grade Two to Grade One is a big big step.

It's a big step. Big step. The year we won – in 1986 we won the Grade Two worlds. That was the year that Ian McLellan's Strathclyde Police done the five on the trot.

Six in a row.

Six in a row in the same year. But a big step up and we went to Grade One. Obviously nowhere near the prize list but the fact that we'd made it. I think the best we ever accomplished was seventh in the Scottish Championship in Alness. The first time it was out in Alness.

If one of the judges had given us the average of the rest of the judges we would have been well in the prize list but it wasn't to be.

Aye, these things happen.

Then after a few years in the late 90s I took a heart attack for the first time and gave up the pipe major's job. We lost a lot of players and that was the reason we sort of dropped down back into Grade Two and we struggled. Now, again because of the players, I think it's the Royal Burgh of Annan they call themselves, they're down in Grade Three A or B or something, mainly because you're only as good as the players. Same as in any band.

Absolutely. Only as good as the players that you've got. Aye, absolutely. Yeah. I think obviously looking back at that, I suppose – that's a fairly quick rise through the ranks. That must have put quite a lot of pressure on the band really in terms of learning tunes, in terms of getting medleys sorted out and getting marches, strathspeys and reels sorted out and all that kind of thing.

The thing is I was reasonably lucky that I could – if you're successful you can gather in players and I was lucky that anybody within maybe twenty or twenty five miles radius of Annan that was a decent player and that's not being disrespectful to anybody but they wanted to come and play with us.

The old story again – you're as good as the players you've got. There's classic examples now. You take the meteoric rise of Inveraray.

Indeed. Yes, absolutely.

Two or three years ago they were a novice juvenile band.

That's right. Yes, absolutely.

But not necessarily because you've imported all their players, which okay they have but there's a lot of home reared players in that band.

There are and I think that, without digressing, I think Stuart's been very keen to develop his youngsters and stuff like that and that's good. That's been a big story in their success.

And then tuition in the schools helps.

It does, yes.

This is one gripe I have with the Dumfries and Galloway education authority. It's one of the few places in Scotland that don't have a piping tutor.

Have they ever had piping tuition in the schools on a formal basis?

Yes. My brother and I, twenty five years ago, taught one night a week and actually produced a school band and the gentleman that was in charge of the musical side of the education authority was a great guy but the people now don't seem interested. They have piping in the school curriculum but they don't provide the tuition for anybody that's interested to further theirself.

Which is a bit of a shame.

Indeed it is.

Because it means that piping is not continuing in these parts. So by this time you'd taken over the band here but you'd also, as you alluded to, had a military career as well in a Regiment, not really associated with the Borders, the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and with a battalion in fact that was very much associated with the west coast, with Argyllshire. How did that all come about?

Well there is a story. A guy – they were building Chapelcross Power Station at the time and there was a guy, his name was Mick Paterson, came from Dunoon, and he was a drummer in the 8th Argylls. He came and played with the band.

My wife and I were asked to go to Dunoon for a weekend, which we did do. So the ladies went downtown Dunoon in the sun on Saturday afternoon and Mick and I went to the local drill hall for a refreshment. One led to another and I signed on for four years in the 8th Argylls.

Right. And how did Mrs Cowan react to that?

It cost me a few quid, I'll tell you. [Laughter]

Aye, I can imagine.

[Laughter] No, no. After it sunk in she was quite happy because it was going to help my piping career because I was lucky in that Ronnie MacCallum was the pipe major and there were some fine players in the band. There was Hugh MacCallum, Roddy MacDonald that went to the States, Roddy was in the band.

He was from Dunoon wasn't he.

That's right. Archie MacCallum

Yes.

Archie was a fine player.

Yes, Ronnie's son.

That's right. He actually lived in Annan for a while and played in the band with me.

Oh did he. Right.

Fine guy. Great player but he had a love affair with the accordion, much to Ronnie's disgust. It was the Campbeltown mafia of course, they were in the band.

Yes, indeed.

Black Ronald MacCallum. Dougie McShannon, Ronnie's father.

Yes, Ronnie's father.

I missed out, Arthur Gillies had been in the band as had Neil MacEachern.

Oh yes, from Islay, yes.

But they had left by then.

Yes, because Neil MacEachern was a good player as well.

He won the Gold Medal.

Yes, in about '63 or '65, round about then.

As did Arthur.

Yes. Arthur won it in the '70s I think if I remember correctly.

Previous to that Ronnie Lawrie of course, he was in an 8th Argyll.

Yes.

A very – historically the Eighth Argylls battalion-wise must have the best history of piping in any battalion in the British Army I'm sure, going back over the years. John MacKenzie, Willie Wilson, John's father.

John's father, yes.

Guys like that. Willie Lawrie.

Yes. Absolutely.

Amazing.

Yes, I suppose a lot of people really steeped in piping from all over that part of the world.

I enjoyed my four years in there. I had and still have a very strong association with Inveraray of course.

Yes, absolutely. Did you get tuition from Ronnie during that time?

I did, yes. He was a fine teacher obviously. He taught Hugh MacCallum. I think Hugh would possibly be his star pupil.

I think so. Yes, I think so. So that would be – the tuition I take it would be when you would go to the summer camps I presume.

Aye, weekends. I enjoyed it. It was a great experience.

I take it you did parades and stuff like that with the Army but you presumably did all sorts of other events and things like that as well.

There's a thing now. I was in four years in the 8th Argylls and I never wore khaki in the four years I was in.

Is that right, yes.

I would always have pipe band uniform. I remember playing in Stirling Castle, I think it was – there was Ronnie and Archie and myself. I'm not sure but probably Hugh and this Army jeep arrived at the house to pick me up to take me to Stirling Castle to play.

From down here?

Aye. There were other guys in the band who could have done the job nearer to hand but we played at this regimental dinner in Stirling Castle with all these officers and banners and I'd never done anything like this in my life before. A rookie from Annan, you know. It was good fun and great experience.

Yes. And I suppose there'd be other less well known names in the band as well, people like Jock Leitch and folk like that.

Jock and Ian Henderson. Ian was a sergeant.

Was he related to Jim Henderson?

Jim Henderson's brother.

Right.

Jim, when he was on leave, Jim used to occasionally play in the band. Martin Wilson, Martin who went to the Edinburgh Police.

Oh yes.

I think Martin's grandson is a fine football player. I'm sure he signed for Liverpool.

Did he really?

But that was another two. They always had a really good drum corps because everybody came from Dunoon but sadly I think there's only one left alive of that complete drum corps. Still go to Cowal every year and I meet this one guy, Angus MacKay, who's a tenor drummer in the band. The rest of the guys sadly have passed on.

Have passed away. Yes. In terms of the actual pipe band playing itself in the Argylls, was Ronnie MacCallum quite

focused on that or was the solo side of things more important for him?

Well Archie, his son, was very hard on his father with regard to who should be play in band competitions because Ronnie always played the – never dropped the guys with his sergeants and corporals and stuff like that. Archie says the guys that should be playing are the guys that are wAnnanted.

Can play, yes.

And because we played in Grade One. These were the days when you had to submit three marches, three strathspeys and three reels. There were no medleys in these days.

No, no. And was that a set circuit?

A set, yes. The first time I played in the band the band was laying up and I was waiting to be put where I was and I'd scott beside the pipe major in the front rank and I'm saying this is going to cause a bit of bother here. A rookie in the band for the first time playing in front rank beside the pipe major and I found out later on the reason I was in the front rank because I was the same size as Ronnie MacCallum and it made him look a wee bit better than having big Jock Leitch beside him. [Laughter]

Yes, somebody who was towering over him, yes. So who was the pipe sergeant in the band at that point?

Neil Henderson. Jim Henderson's father. Great guy. He knew pipe bands. Neil's brother I think played with John Weatherstone's band when they won the World Championship in Belfast.

They were a TA – .

Aye, the 402 or the 277.

The 277 but they were attached to the Argylls, is that right?

Yes. I think it was the 6th/9th Argylls or something. There was a Henderson in that band. We could never beat them. We beat them drumming wise but we could never beat them as a band. Man for man we could, you know. Wee Weatherstone had this knack of getting guys together.

Yes, and getting a good sound out of the band. Yes, absolutely.

And then of course he worked at Hardie's of course.

Well that's right.

Makes a difference.

Yes. There was the whole...

It was a great experience playing in the Argylls and I'm quite proud to still wear their tie.

Yes. I suppose as well – so from the sounds of what you were saying, it was very much a piping thing. There wasn't a tremendous amount of soldiering.

No. I never seen a rifle. I wouldn't know how to fire a rifle – I never done any parades. At the camps if there was a piping job I always got it because I had no experience ...

Of the soldiering stuff.

It was good fun. And you got paid. [Laughter]

Sounds a bit different from today's Army right enough from what I've been hearing through this series of interviews so

there we are. So that would take you what, from the end of the '50s up into what about '61, '62 something like that.

I think '59 to '63 I think it was and then I went back and concentrated on the band again then in the '70s back in solo piping.

And into the '80s too.

I enjoyed the solo piping – it was good. You've just yourself to look after. I mean I enjoyed the band as well.

Yes, but it's a big responsibility running in a band.

I remember doing a broadcast on one of David Murray's programmes and he asked me if you'd to make a choice between pipe bands and solo piping which would you choose. I says I would choose solo piping because I enjoyed both of them but the fact you're only responsible for yourself was a factor. I really did enjoy solo piping – it was good. Still do. Still do. There's so many good players about now and so many good youngsters, it's unbelievable.

Absolutely. Well I can maybe just turn back to the bands for a wee bit. I think obviously with the band you're playing – did you get involved in judging with the pipe bands at any point?

I did a wee bit. I passed these certificates away in 1959 I think it was. I went up to Glasgow. Willie Sloan was the General Secretary or the Chairman or something. He and John K. McAllister used to take the classes. And I passed the necessary certificates then.

And was that theory basically or was it a bit of listening?

A lot of theory. Not a great deal of practical stuff. This was a thing that – it's maybe the way I think, I think it should have been more on the practical side because at the end of the day it's the sound that you're producing and the expertise and the musicality of the thing that counts, not what you're writing down on paper. Except when you're judging of course, you've got to put the corrections...

Sometimes – they changed their method of judging quite a few times. Sometimes you're in a tent, other times you were out. When you were in a tent I thought that was doubting the integrity of the judge by putting them in a tent.

So were you in a tent not knowing which band it was?

That's right, yes.

Yes, so you were judging blind almost.

That's right, aye. I remember the late Seamus MacNeil when he judged pipe bands in a tent, he says he was often thought I'll think I'll just stick my biro pen through there and have a wee look and see who's playing but he said I never stooped to that level.

[Laughter] That must have been difficult and uncomfortable I would have thought.

Aye. You're judging twenty or twenty five bands sitting in a tent, you know.

Not on your own surely.

On your own. You used to hand in your sheets.

Sounds a bit like solitary confinement.

Brass bands still do that. They still do that in the brass band world but, as I say, they've changed their method of judging and then of course the advent of the medley selection, it was a big step.

Yes.

A good step but the only slight thing against it would be the art of march, strathspey and reel playing suffered a wee bit. Not so much now but it did at the start. They were concentrating so much on medley playing that their march, strathspey and reel playing was suffering.

How did you find dealing with the medleys when they came in at first in terms of construction and all the sort of things that pipe bands talk about nowadays?

When they came out first there was – you did marches strathspeys, reel, jigs, hornpipes and stuff like this. Nowadays they have so many – what's the word I can use here – conglomerations of how they put things together and harmonies everywhere and sometimes destroying the music within the piece of music.

Well do you think that maybe sometimes some of the pipe majors don't recognise the limitations of the instrument that they're dealing with and maybe just try and over egg the pudding a wee bit in terms of harmonies and stuff like that.

Yes. I'm sure that's true. The other thing is some of the slow airs or so called slow airs, there wasn't a great deal of music in them. It's just harmonies and stuff like this.

There's no melody that determinable.

You're waiting for the melody to come out and it never comes out.

And I suppose in some ways at the other end of the scale you've got the Toronto Police type approach to things so it's almost – it's a bit different.

It's certainly different. In my opinion not for competition.

No.

It was a wee bit lacking in musicality. I'm sure the composers put a lot of work into it and a lot of work putting it together.

It's very clever.

But some of the playing in some of these bands is absolutely magnificent. Some of the ways they handle the hornpipes and jigs.

Any favourites?

Aye. Most of them are favourites but the two bands that are coming up very quickly is Scottish Power and Inveraray over the past two or three years. Field Marshal – a machine. The SFU, you know. But these other two bands are starting to creep up there. Strathclyde Police are coming back. They are coming back.

Some of the other bands they've got some great performances. Fife Police and was it Culleybackey or something. They played quite well at the end of the day. Maybe just lacking that wee bit to get into the top six.

Yes. Do you think, certainly in terms of bands and developments, there was big developments probably when, in the '60s, '70s, '80s. Was that really – once perhaps Dysart and so on started.

Aye, Dysart had a great run – two World Championships. I think they won them consecutively. I think, I'm not too sure, but they certainly won two World Championships. Great. When the Frasers came in and won it, and then Vicky Police, they won it. A lot of the opinion at the time was, and not necessarily my opinion, but a lot of the opinions going about that he should have won it the year before. Whether that's right – you get these stories happening anyway.

You do, that's true.

At the end of the day it's an opinion. It's not like a race. It's not like the first guy past the post, it's up to the individuals.

But one thing I would say I would like to see more consultation with the judges because the size of the bands nowadays, you're talking in excess of twenty pipers and ten side drummers, well that's a band.

I was looking at a photograph of Ian McLellan's Strathclyde Police and I think there were twenty four of them in the photograph altogether and you've got pipe corps bigger than that now.

That's right. Two piping judges, they're worlds apart. They're not allowed to speak to each other. They can't consult at the end of the competition just in case somebody has missed a glaring thing at the other side of the band and it would probably stop a lot of the controversy that comes about that one judge has got somebody away up and another one's got them...

Quite far down. Yes.

Get together. Talk about it like they do in the solo piping world and come to an amicable solution.

So when did you start your solo judging career?

The first solo competition I judged was the Northeast England Solo Piping Championship in 1960. The late Bob Black was the President of the Pipe Band Association and he lived in Whittley Bay and Bob asked me to go over and judge their competition and that was the first, but the serious stuff began maybe – well I stopped competing after I had – let me think now – 1998 – the early '90s, about '91, '92 I started judging serious stuff then. It was good. Whether the competitors think that way, I don't know but you've always got one friend.

Again, the beauty is that normally there's at least two of you. In the big competitions there's three of you so you talk to each other.

Yes, and that's the difference from doing it. When did you give up the pipe band judging? Was that something that you didn't do for that long?

Very early. Very early.

I can't imagine being stuck...

It must have been about in the late '60s.

Aye. I can't imagine being stuck in a tent handing your sheet out as really the way you want to spend the day.

The first time I sat in a tent was at a solo piping competition here in Annan.

Is that right, yes.

Aye. I told you that Archie MacCallum actually lived in Annan when Arhie was living here and the judge that day was to be John MacLean and he was to get the train from Glasgow to Annan an he'd missed the train or whatever so they were without

a judge so I got roped into do the junior events and I knew that Ronnie MacCallum was at Archie's helping Archie to lay out his garden so I had to go cap in hand up to Archie's to see Ronnie to see if he would come down and judge the senior events.

It was in one of these cubicles and I had done my wee thing in the morning and then the afternoon the senior events came and I was actually playing and I felt a bit embarrassed because I got first prize and Tom Speirs was second that day and the Speirs never forgave me.

No, he would have a thing or two to say about that.

[Laughter] That was my one and only experience in one of these tents or cubicles. I didn't like it. I gave up the bands mainly because we were competing as much or whatever.

And never really thought to go back to it.

No. I preferred the solo piping. I still love pipe bands and going to competitions and giving my opinion [laughter].

Well but you've got to have one of those.

Some great bands. Some of these juvenile bands are tremendous.

Yes, very good, very good. The standard has risen.

These school bands.

Yes. I think a lot – it seems to me anyway just a lot of these school bands are taking the thing much more seriously now than they ever did.

They are.

The likes of Dollar for example.

Dollar and the Edinburgh lot.

I think Dollar are practising pretty much every day. They've got a full time piping instructor and I think, just in passing, not that this is my interview but I would think in passing, listening to some of the kids that are coming out of these bands playing solos are tremendous players.

Oh aye.

Tremendous players.

Some of the kids in the school circuit are really fantastic.

Very very good and play a good instrument.

I feel that they hand out MBEs and OBEs all over the place and the resurgence of kids playing, to my mind, happened in Campbeltown in Kintyre with John Brown and Ian McKerral. If anybody deserved some award these two guys should. They started a revival, in my opinion anyway, they started a revival in junior pipe band playing.

Yes. Oh absolutely, absolutely. And, again, coming from somewhere with a very very strong piping tradition of course.

Oh aye. Definitely.

I think both of them were taught by Tony.

Tony Wilson.

Yeah.

He was a character.

He was a character. He was a good player as well.

A good player – Glasgow Police.

Yes, that's right. So that was good. And I think just in terms of, we've talked about great pipe bands and so on. Great players you've heard of over your playing career, just solo players. Who would you have had up there towards the top?

The two that come to mind are Donald MacLeod and Donald MacPherson but Duncan Johnstone to me was a great player.

Yes.

Didn't compete very much but full of music. Produced one or two top players.

Yes.

I think the guy MacLeod.

Roddy, yes, was one of his pupils. That's right, yes. [Laughter]

Duncan Johnstone if he had competed regularly I'm sure he would have been a strong contender but Donald MacPherson and Donald MacLeod and then you've got Burgess and MacFadyen and Johnny MacDougall, Angus MacDonald. There's a host of these guys.

Yes, and latterly I suppose there's...

Just now there's six or seven great players. It would maybe be unfair to mention but I think the majority of people if they pick

their top seven or eight players I'm sure we would have just about the same guys.

The same guys, yes, aye. And in terms of just your own experience in piping over the years, do you think it's as healthy now as it's ever been?

I would say healthier. I would say healthier, aye. A thing that's noticeable now – years ago when the guys from North America came across it cost them a lot of money, as it does now, but they were so serious. Very very serious. Now you get a smile out of them. They seem to be more relaxed than the older days. In days gone by because it had cost them so much they were determined to do well. As they still are just now but they're doing it more lightheartedly I think. I might be wrong in saying that but...

It might be something to do with the growth of piping and things over there because piping is very very healthy in the United States and in Canada. One of the interesting groups of people that we've spoken to over the course of the interviews are the New Zealand folk and it just seemed that there was always a very strong tradition of piping there and the same names keep coming up, Donald Bain and people like that.

Donald Bain, Lewis Turrell. He was the guy that started the ball rolling.

He was, yes, away back in the late '50s I think he won the Gold and I think he won some of the light music competitions at Inverness and so on as well yes.

There was a guy came across one year and to me he was a tremendous player, a guy by the name of Bill Boyle.

I've heard people speaking about him.

Great player. I remember playing a recital competition in the West End Hotel in Edinburgh and the judges were D.R., John MacLellan and Ian MacLeod. Angus was first, Iain Morrison second, I was third and Hugh MacInnes was fourth or something. The guy that won that competition that day was Bill Boyle.

Really.

Oh, tremendous. He played this chanter, it was brilliant. Turned out it was a polypenco MacAllister chanter.

Really.

It was, but some player. Great player. There was another big New Zealand boy played that night, Alistair Munro. I think he's still on the go.

Yes, now is he not a pupil of Donald MacLeods? I think he came over here and did some...

Oh he could have done, yes, aye.

And then went back.

And then of course you've got Murray.

Yes.

He's won one or two Clasps, the boy.

He has, yes. He has indeed.

He's a nice guy.

Nice guy and he's obviously had a very long career in piping.

Aye, a good guy Murray. A gentleman.

Yes, absolutely.

I don't think I've met any bad guys in piping.

Is that right.

I've never met any bad guys. The odd bad judge from time to time [laughter]. No, no, seriously, no, I've not met any bad guys.

And it's been something that you've enjoyed.

Oh, without a doubt.

And still enjoy.

It's a career that if you don't enjoy it, put the pipes in the box.

And walk away from it, yes.

That's what I say. At the end of a competition if I'm asked to say a few words at a kids competition I always say your education is first, keep away from women and drink and enjoy it and if you don't enjoy it, go find something else to do and I think that's not a bad outlook I think.

Indeed. I think it's got to be enjoyed.

Especially the women and the drink. [Laughter]

[Laughter] Absolutely. Well I think on that note Walter thank you very much for your time. It's been interesting to hear about your experiences in piping and just over the wide range of experience that you've had both in the solo world

and with pipe bands but also with your little sojourn up in Argyll which I think – it was interesting to hear about it.

It's been a pleasure James. A pleasure.

**Thank you very much. So we'll just stop the tape there.
Thank you.**