

Andrew Wright Comments and Questions

Dugald MacNeill I suppose the first thing you made me think was yes Donald MacLeod could tune his pipes very quickly and very well and then play a tune and the other wee Donald that you mentioned Wee Donald MacLean he was the same. He took no time at all in tuning and he always played extremely well if a bit roundly.

One of the things I think that spoils modern piping is the time modern pipers take to tune. No-one wants to listen to some guy tuning with not very musical tuning notes so I am all for getting a movement ahead to stop people tuning in front of people who have maybe paid to listen.

I always remember Joe Wilson who served in the army with Wee Donald saying that when Wee Donald thought he was fit to play at major things in the Officer's Mess Donald would get all two or three of them tuned up and he never touched his own pipes. He'd tune them in the corridor just going into the place no bother at all then play first. I don't know how we can discipline pipers who tune tune tune tune. I know one who enjoys tuning more than he enjoys playing.

Now we have got today for sale Donald MacLeod's book one and book two but we have also tunes got Archie Kenneth who is the only other composer who composed a reasonable number of Ceol Mor tunes in the last 40 years. There are 2 books with 9 tunes in each book and some of these tunes are really very pleasant. He was quite a good composer and I would suggest to the music committee if they are listening to think of setting more of Wee Donald's tunes and Archie Kenneth's tunes for the silver medal.

Any comments, any questions?

Barnaby Brown You mentioned that his playing had a special quality and that was spontaneity. I'd like to ask you was that specifically in his light music playing and in his piobaireachd composition or did he bring that spontaneity at all into his traditional piobaireachd playing?

AW I have no doubt in my mind that he played with the same grammar throughout the piece. He knew exactly what he was going to do. He would know the road he was going to take through the tune but he would have the final touches. Quite often these paths through the tune were common paths through the tune, the same things occurring in different tunes.

BB So you wouldn't have ever sensed that he might have liked to compose a further variation?

AW He did that in McMurrich's Salute. I'm told that he was tuning up for a recital at summer camp. He had been working on the ground of McMurrich's Salute that week and variation one just came to him when he was tuning up and he went on and he played the whole tune. That is spontaneity. I was told that last summer by some-one who was actually at the school. He had the gift of doing that. I've also seen him playing marches and just putting a second time in – I heard him putting a second time in Leaving Glenurquhart. He had spontaneity that way but in his piobaireachd he knew exactly the road he was going to take.

John Frater What views did Donald have about time signatures in his own tunes? Was he consciously using time signatures?

AW Oh yes, he used time signatures. For example he used to sing a bit of canntaireachd and he just made it up but he would also sing for example “and 1 a 2 and 3 and 4 and a 1 a 2” (I got a Kiss of the King's Hand bar 1 ground) so he certainly got four beats in every phrase though sometimes it would vary between compound time and simple time. Sometimes he would have to make

room for cadences. It wasn't a strict drummer's beat it was a "one two three four" or 3's or 2's as the tune demanded. So it wasn't a mathematical time signature. He wasn't worried about getting the mathematical total of every bar right. He was interested in getting the pulses to come through at fairly regular intervals.

Jack Taylor You said that he had gone for 25 years to John MacDonald. Bob Nicol and Bob Brown were critical of his teaching by John MacDonald in the sense that they said that he only ever went to John MacDonald when "Old Johnny" was an old man and that implied to them that John MacDonald perhaps didn't give as much, or Donald MacLeod didn't get as much from him as the Bob's had. Do you have anything to say about that?

AW I also knew Bob Nicol very well, and while Bob Nicol's playing and Bob Brown's playing was very much alike, Donald's was different. I took care to say that he went over a period of 25 years. He didn't go for 25 years, and he always had his own style of playing. His playing was if anything perhaps more choppy, if I can use that word, more choppy than theirs and more choppy than we play today. For example, in Old Men of the Shells, (sings start of ground) he had a very strong beat. It was different. Of course both styles are complimentary but that was the way he played.

RW Far be it from me to criticise the chairman for his remarks at the start of his talk, but really there is only one side of the river that is important in piping and that is the north side of the river. Dugald, I'm sorry but you have got Donald MacPherson, Ian Maclellan, Peter MacLeod Senior and Junior and your own namesake Seamus. I'm surprised at you. All we had from Govan is Andrew Wright and a bunch of Macfadyens.

AW and Kenny MacDonald and Norman Gillies. I think that Govan and Partick are just two areas.

RW Dugald mentioned that we have the two books for sale and Susan MacLeod, who is now guardian of Donald's estate since Winnie died, is very forward thinking, and she has put the books on the iPad and she also has Donald singing the tunes on too, which is quite useful.

Peter McCalister Andrew I was just going to take up Dugald's point about setting of these tunes for competition. What is your own view on that? I know we are going to hear more from Simon on setting tunes this afternoon.

AW I would be all for it. I think there is a tendency to think that a lot depends on the age of the composition and that pipers generally when a new tune comes through don't take it seriously, but I think that there are so many good tunes coming through now that we have got to take it seriously. Otherwise the music will stagnate. The tunes of Donald MacLeod each have their own special touches especially in the rhythms in the variations after the ground. Donald's compositions have also been called "too tuney" – too much tune in them – people tell us and that pipers like the five note dirges that last for 15 minutes, but I think that the two most important points in music are melody and rhythm and Donald's tunes, to me anyway, have got plenty melody.

DM Archie Campbell would have said that some of them are too tuney – almost like slow airs.

AW I use the term that his music was more rhythmically driven.

Rae Bell I was privileged to have been taught by Donald MacLeod for two hours. We were at OTC camp at the Don barracks in Aberdeen. He took us through two tunes. We never saw the music. We just sung it, or mostly just played it on the chanter and it was quite astonishing that we could have learned it without even seeing it.

So my question is, for yourself, did he expect when he was teaching a new piobaireachd that that you would have learnt it first from the score or would he introduce you to a new piobaireachd and sing it so you could learn it that way?

AW No he would introduce me to a new piobaireachd and if I came back the next week he would more or less expect me to have it off. The whole thing about piobaireachd is memorising it. He had a great memory. He had his own method of playing and you could get into his own style of playing which was square, or perhaps more square than some people will play today. It was a pretty good way to learn. As I said in my talk the first time I heard him play I thought he was playing the tune very fast and I came to realise that up till then I had been playing very slow. I've still got some of those old tape recordings when we played together and when I listen to them today they are much faster.

John Shone Can you comment on the quality of his instrument?

AW He had an old set of MacDougall pipes and those pipes today are played by Innes Smith. These pipes were being kept for Donald's grandson but the boy wasn't interested. I heard that these pipes were coming up for sale and Innes Smith one of my students bought the pipes. But the thing that pleased Mrs MacLeod very much was that Innes Smith's people came from Lewis, where Donald came from.

Rory Sinclair Just a comment about the discussion on John MacDonald of Inverness being an old man. I read that when Donald was captured during the war that John MacDonald was quite distraught and kept asking – I haven't heard from MacLeod, where is MacLeod? So clearly what MacLeod was to John MacDonald was a significant student.

AW There was no question. I think that the first time he went to John MacDonald was when John MacDonald visited the Western Isles to do teaching. And then Donald went back. When he joined the Seaforth's in his

early 20s he would I assume be at Fort George and take up again with John MacDonald. Over a period of years.

He told me a story. He said that MacDonald could be quite cutting in his style of teaching. I think that Donald won the Gold Medal at the Northern Meeting and he played Glengarry's March. He said he went to MacDonald's just after and MacDonald said "well let me hear your Glengarry's March". So Donald played it and MacDonald's comment was "they never gave you the Gold Medal for that did they?"

I remember that RB Nicol told me something the same about John MacDonald's teaching. Nicol told me that he was sent along, I think it was by King George the Fifth, and Nicol went along and MacDonald said well pick your pipes up and play me something. And Nicol told me he got them up and played a tune and MacDonald said "Why did they send you along to me? You are not ready for me yet. They have no right to send you along to me." And then he said play me something else and Nicol said he played something else. And they came to the end of the lesson and MacDonald said "I'll see you next week".

DM Donald MacLeod told me that his first meeting with a big teacher was with Willie Ross who had been sent by this Society to teach in the Isles. He was the smallest person in the class. And Willie Ross said "Look Donald go across to the hotel and get me a jug of water" and Donald thought this must be for his whisky but no it was because he hadn't played his pipes for a while so he poured some in the bag.

Anyway later that week Wee Donald was playing everything right but Willie Ross detected that he couldn't read the music so he said "play that tune" and Wee Donald said "well I just couldn't play it, I would have to have heard it" so Willie said right then by the end of the week you are going to be able to sight read music. And he did. So it is thanks to the Piobaireachd Society that Willie

Ross and John MacDonald were sent up there because that was a wilderness in a way for good piping and more than Wee Donald came out of it.

Bruce Hitchins A comment about going to somebody later in life. I would have thought that would be an advantage because people do change their opinions of piobaireachd and their knowledge would increase and they might play tunes differently to how they played them 20 years ago. However I do think that Donald put something of himself into the music – he was so musical - particularly the way he played his variations. He played them more straight line, especially the doublings, he didn't phrase them so much as other people do, for example the Bobs.

Another thing, he composed Cabar Feidh gu Brath in honour of the regiment for the last time that he played at the Cabar Feidh dinner in London.

AW When would that be Bruce?

BH In 1963. Cabar Feidh Gu Brath – Stags Heads for Ever – is the saying when people finish conversations. On the back of the pipe programme he wrote – and I have one of these cards – that the regiment owes him nothing and that he owes the regiment everything. He wrote that on each card. That was the last day of his army service.

AW I think that you have a very good point there Bruce that when we think of somebody going to a person over a period of 25 years - as you get older - I don't have any doubt actually – if you teach tunes to a young boy of 12 13 or 14 it's different if that boy was 10 or 15 years older. I think that piobaireachd comes easier to those who have matured a bit in years. I think when you learn your first tune you only go so far into it but that when the number multiplies they all begin to relate to each other so when you get to 30 you have more feel for the music.

DM As Andrew said he composed a huge number of excellent light music tunes. I asked him once how did he manage to compose so many. Oh he said that's only a tiny fraction of what I compose. He said that every time I wrote a tune I'd scribble it out. The next day or the following week I would look at it and he said that most of it would go in the fire. So he said I composed hundreds and hundreds of tunes but what you see are only the ones worth publishing.

J T He gave a recital in Aberdeen once. I had never heard him play. It was all his own compositions and I hadn't heard any of them before. He was as good as that.

The second thing I was going to say was about tempo. I'm sure that our perception of what is slow and fast changes all the time. Kilberry wrote in one of his letters that he had listened to Donald MacLeod playing the Wee Spree. It took 10 minutes. That was far too long in Kilberry's opinion. It should only take 7 and a half minutes and he played it twice over to prove that it should only take 7 and a half minutes. He said that was because teachers like John MacDonald were saying to pupils you must express and they were using that as a reason to expand the tune. He thought that Donald MacLeod played too slowly.

DM If there are no more questions I think we'll thank Andrew again for his excellent talk.