

Gems from The Piobaireachd Society Archive by Dr Jack Taylor.

Chair Darach Urquhart.

Winner of the Gold Medal in Inverness in 1973, a student of the Bobs of Balmoral and President of the Piobaireachd Society for 12 years during which time he revolutionised our website and opened up our Society to the wider public which resulted in a massive leap in membership numbers, Dr Jack Taylor.

Dr Jack Taylor

Introduction

Thank you Darach.

Thanks very much for inviting me to talk this morning. It is really a privilege to be here again and to talk about this wonderful archive of material that the Society has.

People tend to look at the website nowadays, and much of what we have in our archive is on the website undoubtedly. But much of it, and still the majority of it is in the National Library of Scotland.

The Society of course started in 1901 and all the papers, articles, minutes, and original sources of music are in the NLS. So once you are retired and have plenty of time on your hands you can wander in there and you can spend the rest of your life burrowing around in the Archive.

But of course what we have here with the website is I think a good advantage for people because it can be seen from anywhere. It was started up by John Dow, my predecessor.

It was a much smaller affair then, but he had recordings from Jeannie Wheeler of radio broadcasts, and he put them up together with information about Piobaireachd. Then he scanned in source manuscripts and it all developed from there.

The bulk of the material on the website is available for the members, but if you are not a member and want to know a little bit about Piobaireachd, there are a couple of tunes there, called “free”, to hopefully attract people. One of them is Iain Speirs playing Lament for the Iolaire.

<https://www.piobaireachd.co.uk/listen?tune=lament-for-the-iolaire>

So that would perhaps give somebody an introduction to Piobairachd who doesn't know much about it, and is wondering what it is all about. That tune

was composed of course by Donald MacLeod, and the Donald Macleod was yesterday, with the Piobaireachd winner being Finlay Johnstone playing Lament for John Morrison of Assynt House, which is a typical Donald MacLeod tune in that it is just about impossible to memorise. I think Finlay deserves congratulations for that.

It is when you go into the Members section of the website that you can see the material that is there. There are all the tunes of course, and I think that we have most of the Piobaireachd repertoire there, together with recordings of many of the tunes.

Then there is the Reference Library. There is a huge amount of stuff in there. We have been fortunate to be able to collect this material over the years. Articles which have appeared, all the manuscripts and old books of Piobaireachd, the archive of Robert Reid, the archive of Malcolm MacPherson, both fantastic, and much more.

Bill Livingstone and Maol Donn.

But where we will start is with Bill Livingstone. Bill, as you know, died not long ago. Bill kindly said that the Piobaireachd Society could use his Piobaireachd Diaries. He has done five of them, we have got four. The last one was released recently.

We can listen to Bill talking about a tune that is probably one of the most played tunes in the repertoire, certainly one of the most analysed, and that is MacCrimmons Sweetheart.

<https://www.piobaireachd.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Narration-Teachers-and-MacCrimmons-Sweetheart.mp3>

That's Bill, and MacCrimmons Sweetheart.

And if you want to go bonkers you can read either of these two articles.

<https://www.piobaireachd.co.uk/library/reference-library/published-articles-2?coll=1791>

Take the second one first, Problems of Notating Piobaireachd, a study of Maol Donn, written by Peter Cooke, an eminent musicologist from the School of Scottish Studies. That was a seminal paper, where he looked at all the various ways Maol Donn had been written down, about ten sources. Every one was different.

He tried to make sense of this as a classically trained musician. His conclusion was, pretty well what Bill was saying, it is pretty well in compound time, and it

was best represented in the score of General Thomason in Ceol Mor. The playing which most closely reflected that was the playing of John MacDonald of Inverness.

Robinson MacLennan is an American musician and musicologist. If you think that Peter Cooke's article is complex, you should read MacLennan's. Again he took that tunes, and he analysed recordings of people playing it. He timed them exactly, every single note and almost every single grace note was timed. He took leading players, Donald MacPherson, Donald MacLeod. Donald MacLeod would sing it. He would time that. Donald MacLeod would play it on the chanter. He would time that. Donald MacLeod would play it on the pipes. He would time that. Lo and behold, they were all different. Lo and behold, none of them actually followed any of the scores.

So there is a whole load of academia there on the website.

Annual Conference 1972 – publication of Piobaireachd.

Among the material I find interesting is in the Conference Proceedings. This conference has faithfully been recorded since it started in 1972. It's quite a thought, it has been going for well over 50 years.

<https://www.piobaireachd.co.uk/library/reference-library/conference-proceedings?coll=9478>

We have got the conference report on the website as you can see. We can see that it was "eagerly awaited" and it was in Minard Castle, Argyll. It was gratifying that there was a good attendance of forty people, as there were many other piping things on that weekend.

The principle performer at the Friday night Ceilidh – and I think having heard Company's Lament and Tulloch Ard last night, which were beautiful, we have stepped down a bit because the principle performer played Lament for the Children on the Friday night. That was Captain John MacLellan.

The first session was delivered by Donald MacLeod, talking about the teaching of Piobaireachd. The second talk was to have been delivered by Bob Brown, but he had gone to Australia earlier than expected, so Neil Ramsay spoke. He was I think the son of the Factor at Balmoral who was responsible for sending Bob Nicol and Bob Brown to John MacDonald.

In the afternoon, Archie Kenneth talked about Publication of Piobaireachd.

The evening ceilidh was run by John MacLellan. Three pipers were billed to start the ball rolling. The first was Seamus MacNeill who chose as his tune

MacLaine of Lochbuie's Lament, playing the original setting as it appeared in Duncan Campbell's Manuscript. Then Corrienessan's Salute from Donald MacLeod, and hiharin odin hiharin dro from John MacFadyen.

On the back of this article there is a report about a competition in Dundee. The Under 15 march was won by a piper called Donald McBride who some of you might know. Another piper called Anne Stewart was 2nd in the Piobaireachd, and the son of my own tutor, Roderick Barron, was 1st in the class C Piobaireachd there.

Here is the conference advertisement. A cast of characters there – James Campbell, Kilberry, John Macfadyen, Neil Fraser BBC, Professor Alex Haddow the eminent Scottish Historian, Seamus MacNeill (talking all the time) and Archie Kenneth.

I'd like to talk a little bit more about what Archie Kenneth said. He talked about Publication of Piobaireachd. He felt that some publications needed to be revised, but that some shouldn't be touched. The ones which shouldn't be touched were Kilberry, because it represented a particular playing style, and Binneas is Boreraig for the same reason.

Of course we now know that Binneas has been touched – but it has not been altered in the sense of the timing, only that it is now on the five line stave. I am looking forward to when that appears – and there a couple of samples here today.

He wondered about publishing the entire Campbell Canntaireachd – that has now been done – but the collection he thought had the strongest claim to revision was the current Piobaireachd Society collection. He thought that the notes were not adequate in that they did not represent enough of the different settings of tunes. He didn't think that the music itself should be revised, only the notes.

He had the wonderful idea that perhaps tapes could supplement the tunes. Of course as time has gone on we have recordings. He talked about two tyrannies, the tyranny of the printed page, and the tyranny of the tape. And there was another tyranny – what you'd call the house style of the Piobaireachd Society collections, so any editor taking over as he was would have to be bound by time signatures and the way it had all been written before. He wondered about putting the music in the form that it is in Binneas – without bar lines and time signatures.

He said there was probably another two books – and that was after book 11. He managed to produce four more. He mentioned a whole load of tunes which

could be published – such as Donald Duaghal MacKay, Chisholm’s Salute, Melbank’s Salute, Glengarry’s Lament, and I think it is fair to say that most of them have now been published.

His final remarks – “ *a final word on the possible function of tapes. We have already adopted a card index system as a formal method of collating all available knowledge about any particular tune. Would it be possible to have a card index of tapes illustrative of the various styles of playing any particular tune? This idea has no particular reference to tapes as ancillary to publication, it is simply a suggestion about how tapes could enshrine present day knowledge and methods. If we don’t make use of the easy techniques of reproduction that we now possess, we might sacrifice much of the knowledge that is presently available.*”

Well how could he have known that the internet was to come along and make all that so easily possible, as we have here on the website.

Archie Kenneth did a fantastic job with editing all those books.

Aspects of Piobaireachd Playing by John MacFadyen – 1975.

John Macfadyen was introduced by Allan Beaton, a stalwart of the conference who recorded every word that was said and every tune that was played for many years.

He said that in 1968 John Macfadyen had carried off the Oban Competition, the Inverness Clasp, the Silver Chanter at Dunvegan and the Bratach Gorm in London, and he thought that was a marvellous feat for any player.

John started his talk by saying that you

“portrayed your character, to a greater or lesser extent, in the music that you played.”

I think that is a prescient comment. The character of the player comes through, or should come through in the music, no matter how much the music is the same on the page.

He went on to talk about names of tunes, and whether names of tunes related to the music of tunes. He drew a conclusion which was no, not really. He used some tunes to illustrate, and give his opinion about whether they reflected the name. He had done some recordings, and he gave an opinion.

The first one he used was MacLeod of Raasay’s Salute. He simply said, is this a Salute? Here he is, and I’ll ask you that question, is this a Salute?

<https://www.piobaireachd.co.uk/library/tunes-index/g-m/?tune=macleod-of-raasays-salute>

Hands up those who think that was played as a Salute? Hands up those who thought it was played as a Lament?

Yes, the minority is correct in John MacFadyen's view. It would not have been that recording that he played, but he felt that the music of that tune strongly suggested that it should be played as a Lament, not a Salute.

He said "When you get a tune of this nature, in the ground in particular, the emphasis and stress on Cs and Es seems to me on a cursory examination that these tunes are more of the doleful pathetic lamentable type of music rather than the joyous flamboyant type of Salute." John had a wonderful way with words.

The next category of tunes he considered were Battles. Are they Battles, or are they not Battles? Of course there are always winners and losers he said, so you can think about that.

The tune he chose to illustrate that was The Battle of Bealach nam Brog. He played a recording of himself playing it. We haven't got that, but we have got Tom Speirs. I'll ask you the same question.

<https://www.piobaireachd.co.uk/library/tunes-index/a-f/?tune=battle-of-beallach-nam-brog>

Battle? Hands up. Lament? Hands up. Yes, John would have been pleased with you. He saw that clearly as a lamenty kind of tune. In the discussion, Professor Alex Haddow, who was a great historian, and who recorded lots of the history behind these tunes, said yes yes it was quite right that The Battle of Bealach nam Brog was played as a lament, and he gave the detailed historical reasons for that.

John then went on to talk about passing notes, connecting notes and the relationship of the score to the playing. For this he used the tune The Sister's Lament. He put up the score and he asked people simply to observe how the notes in the score were related to the notes as they were played by the pipers.

We will play Andrew Wright, and we will put the score up, and we will see how much, or not, there is a relationship between the score and the playing.

<https://www.piobaireachd.co.uk/library/tunes-index/t-z/?tune=the-sisters-lament>

So you can see, as we all know, that the notes on the page do not reflect the notes as they are played, and John simply used that tune to illustrate this. Especially he said, be very careful with the passing notes, the connecting notes.

The passing note depended on where it is coming from, and where it is going to, what was the musical context of that particular passage. And again, we all know that that is very much the case.

He then went on to look at something that I hadn't particularly thought about. And it was about where you get three groups of equally written notes in succession in any tune. To illustrate that he used Sound of the Waves. So you have these three three note groups here at the beginning which look exactly the same. He said that the piper playing them, will not usually play them the same. They will do something with either the second, it is usually the second, there is a bit of a difference in timing, but sometimes it is the third, and sometimes it may be the first.

He used a recording of himself playing The Sound of the Waves to illustrate that. We haven't got him, but we have his brother Duncan playing The Sound of the Waves. Again, if you look at the score, and listen to the piping and the timing of the notes.

<https://www.piobaireachd.co.uk/library/tunes-index/n-s/?tune=sound-of-the-waves-against-the-castle-of-duntroon-the>

Again, you can hear clearly the difference. So again, it is written the same, but not played the same.

He gave the score of Sound of the Waves to Anne Lorne Gillies, the famous Gaelic singer. He asked Ann simply to look at the score, study it for a bit, then sing it. And she sang it almost identically to the sort of way that Duncan Macfadyen played it there. She did these little inflections in the similarly timed notes – they were not sung as written.

So there we are, that is John Macfadyen, and a bit about Piobaireachd detail.

Judging

There have been talks about judging over the years, surprise surprise. Frank Richardson talked a bit. He said when he judged his first major competition the bench was “50% amateur and professional, me and John MacDonald. Any one who would know John would know that I was not just required to endorse the decision, but to state my own opinion first, like the junior member of a Court Martial. So I learnt how to judge from him.”

“However, in 1933, at Gordon Castle Games, a very forthright and very outspoken and splendid professional piper of these days, John Wilson in fact, got a hold of me and said “I hear you are judging the Northern Meeting. Do you know anything about Piobaireachd?”

In those days there was always in the boot of my car a well tuned bagpipe, and I played some of the grounds of the chosen tunes for the Northern Meeting which I had from John MacDonald. After that John Wilson became a very valued ally”

There is lots more. “The learning of set tunes by the judges, now this is very important. I think that the Northern Meeting expects this, although it does not ask. It expects that those who are asked to judge should have learned the tunes, and should know them, so that they are really in a position to judge them.”

He concluded his talk with a remark by Arthur Rubinstein, the famous classical musician, who said “The pursuit of perfection may extinguish self expression”.

Then there was a paper given by Eddie Swindle. He was a respected amateur piper, an Irishman, who by all accounts wasn’t the most modest of characters.

He said “I have been fortunate that I play the pipe fairly well, not as well as I should, but fairly well, and that helps quite a bit”.

He went on to talk about his experiences of judging.

“The first time that I sat on the bench was at Inveraray Games in 1972. It was a wet kind of day and I was detailed with another man to do the March, Strathspey and Reel. The first person came up and said “Who’s this?”. The gentleman beside me said “This is Edward Swindle”. “I see. What did you call him? Pardon?”.

I said Can I have three marches. I can still see the look on that man’s face today when I asked him for his three marches which duly he gave me and in fine fashion played.

At the end of the competition he came over and he shook hands and said “I hope you enjoyed your day, it was nice to see you there”. That was John Burgess.

Since that day we have had many encounters. I remember John coming up and saying in fine fashion, good form, “Kennedy”. And strutting off. In other words, that was the tune he wanted to play.

I said “John, you’re not on. Can I have another two?” I got another two, the second was Kilbowie Cottage, which he didn’t play very well, so John didn’t get anywhere.

So the gentleman I was sitting with and I were in the tent afterwards. John came across and said “What did you think of it today?” I said “What did I think of what John?” He said “What did you think of my tune?” I said “Well, if you can’t play it any better than that, you shouldn’t ask an apprentice judge.”

He talked about the fact that pipers often had pipes which were very strong, and weren't producing a great tone. Maximum effort, minimum return he called it. In the discussion afterwards, there was some debate about that. Seamus MacNeill said no, no, no, there should be maximum effort, maximum return. He cited Bob Brown, who had very easy pipes, but who blew them "like hell". John Macfadyen disagreed. He said there should be minimum effort, maximum return.

Eddie Swindle also said that it was important for the piper to have a good bearing, to look good. Again John disagree with that. He said it is not a Mr World competition.

Stories

There are plenty of them. I think the best paper in that respect was given by Dr Colin Caird, in 1982. He gave some of his memories. He at that time was the oldest member of the Piobaireachd Society, so his memories stretched back for some considerable time.

He talked of his lessons with Willie Ross.

"Willie Ross had just about then come to Edinburgh, and he was taking the Army Class in the Castle. So I went up to Willie Ross. The first day I went up I toiled up the Castle Esplanade past the sentry at the gates and went inside and climbed up, and ever up, to the very top of the Castle.

I was ushered into his flat, and into a little room. It was a little room, about the size of the corner of this one, and there was a little single fishtail gas jet and a little gas fire, a couple of chairs and a table, and that was about all. Except the linoleum covering on the floor. That was a very remarkable linoleum covering, because it the great ability, when any wind blew in the castle, to bounce up and down. That was my first introduction to Willie."

"Now Willie I found was a very hard task master. He made me play a few tunes, and then I had to set off and learn new tunes, mostly four part tunes. He always expected an awful lot to be learned in a short time. He never reproached however, he never said "You've not practiced", but there was no letting up. If a phrase wasn't right and it took three quarters of an hour to sort it, three quarters of an hour was spent."

"When it came to Piobaireachd, it was the same thing. I sat there and Willie prodicaed a chanter, and played. He wouldn't let me look at the music. I had to learn by ear. Once I got a tune, I was allowed to look at music and may even be allowed to try out a little on my own.

I think one often learned more by listening to his tuning, when he was playing his pipes and tuning up. One usually got snatches of Piobaireachd, and I think that was sometimes more revealing than when he actually sat down and played the chanter. He was as you know employed by the Piobaireachd Society and I think that rather constrained him."

He then went to John MacDougall-Gillies.

"Gillies I remember was a meek old gentleman with a little pointed beard, very quiet. He came into the room while I was sitting waiting for his arrival at the table. He said good afternoon, and he solemnly laid a chanter down in the middle of the table. And there the chanter stayed. I never once heard him play it. But it was a symbol of office, and there it stayed. When he was done, he picked it up and went out with it.

He gave all his instruction in his own Canntaireachd. Well, there is one thing you must remember. You must play with your low hand a little harder. You must make B longer than you think it ought to be, and then it will be about right, because no piper makes B long enough. Not one of them. I don't always myself, but I want you to make B always longer than you think it should be."

So what you remember from your lessons.

Then he went to judge at Oban, "to the Argyllshire Gathering around about 1920s." He went very happily he said. And he was in Oban and "there was the sinister figure of Willie Ross walking in the opposite direction. He got me by the buttonhole and said "We are having a little ceilidh in the Argyle Arms tonight. You'll come along, won't you."

And I thought, yes this is great, I'll come along. So I went along to the Argyll Arms quite happy and light-hearted, and was duly shown upstairs to a big room one floor up. I don't know if it is still there, but it was quite a decent sized room. And there sitting were the serried ranks of pipers. All the professional pipers of the day.

In the front row, they were kind of arranged in tiers, was the top of the hierarchy, then you got less and less the further back you went. In the front row were seated Willie Ross, John MacDonald, Reid, MacDougall-Gillies, John MacColl. I can't remember who else was there, but in the very centre were two elderly bearded figures, with long grey beards, and bowed heads. I had a suspicion that one of them was Patrick Og.

The ceilidh started, and they all got up and played. Then a horrible moment came when Gillies said "Now, you will just get up and play a little tune". I

think this was the most awful moment of my life, having to get up and play in front of this audience, this hanging jury.

But I got up, and I played something. I don't have any idea what it was. In spite of the conversation yesterday, I don't think it was concentration that got me through, it certainly wasn't preparation. It must have been some sort of animal instinct, but I got through, and I was greeted with polite applause.

Somebody brought me a sort of pint mug, almost filled up with whisky, and with this anaesthetic I managed to pass the rest of the evening."

Great stories. Now we can move on to some more tunes.

The MacPhersons

Seamus MacNeill talked about the MacPhersons. Of course the whole dynasty, Calum Piobaire, his sons Angus and Jockan, then he came to talking about Malcolm MacPherson.

"Malcolm, Angus's son was the best Piobaireachd player I ever remember hearing, not so much in person, but as he came over on recording. When you realised he played piobaireachd differently to how we play it.

I played a recording in California on one occasion, when Iain Macfadyen, John Burgess, and I were sitting with the students. Iain learned Colbeck on the basis of that tape, and Iain had said at that session when he heard Malcolm "We don't know how to play Piobaireachd. And Iain learned Colbeck and he went on and won the Grants with it, twice, playing Colbeck."

So Seamus thought Malcolm was wonderful. He got some lessons from Malcolm MacPherson.

"One tune per week. He told me which tune I had to commit to memory for next week's lesson. I would learn the tune in a week. I would play the tune on the pipes and Malcolm would walk in front of me with a practice chanter, and I followed him as he conducted me, pointing to the notes."

"An important aspect of the conversation was the interpretation of The King's Hand. He said "Do you know how the King's Hand goes?" I said, yes I know how you play it. And I sang the start of it to him. He said "No, that is the way my father played it". We all know how Angus wanted the tune played. Then he said "My Uncle Jockan played it this way, and sang it a little bit differently. And John MacDonald played it that way, and sang it another way. And I play it this way, and sang it a fourth way."

They were all MacPherson pipers, and they all played the King's Hand differently. Malcolm would laugh at the idea that there is only one way to play a tune.

And we can hear a little bit of Colbeck, played by Malcolm MacPherson.

<https://www.piobaireachd.co.uk/library/tunes-index/g-m/?tune=lament-macleod-of-colbecks>

Below it we have Iain MacFadyen. I think you will agree it is not a million miles away.

The gem of the collection is this, The Finger Lock. Here is Malcolm MacPherson playing The Finger Lock.

<https://www.piobaireachd.co.uk/library/tunes-index/t-z/?tune=the-finger-lock-a-ghlas-mheur>

And here is Roddy Ross talking about the tune at this Conference.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=262Q90EIi94>

So that is just a wee taste of some of the Gems from the Archive. Thank you very much.

Derek Fraser Thank you very much Jack. Are there any questions for Jack.

Peter McCalister Are there any recordings of Willie Ross on the website?

JT No. If you have got anything, tell me. There is a recording somewhere of him playing Too Long in this Condition. I've never been able to find that. If somebody knows where it is, please send it to me.

Francis Chamberlain You said that the proceedings were always noted. When did they start writing them?

JT I think they were always recorded. The tapes – reel to reel – Jeannie .at is posted.

Robert Wallace Have most of the tunes been covered by recordings?

JT Most of the tunes have been covered, certainly the well-known tunes. But there are still recordings we need of some tunes, definitely. Peter knows the ones we haven't got recordings of, and if you come across a recording of a tune we don't have, then we would be pleased to have it.

DF I think Jack Lee may have recorded all the tunes from books 1-16?

JT He has. He sells them, so we don't want to interfere with that process.

RW You said you were going to play the John MacDonald Prelude?

JT As an introduction to Robert's session about John MacDonald, we can play what he composed. It is called John MacDonald's Prelude. He would play this if he was going to play a tune with a lot of high Gs in it.

<https://www.piobaireachd.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Introduction-to-A-Prelude.mp3>

<https://www.piobaireachd.co.uk/archives/6912>

PM Was that John MacDonald playing?

JT No, it was John MacFadyen I think.

I can give Robert, who is giving the next talk, some advice from John MacFadyen.

RW Always welcome.

JT *"It is always good to know when you are going to come second. This is infact the second time in my life" he said "that this has happened. The first time was when I was at a competition at Arisaig and I was rather anxious to get away early from the Strathspey and Reel Competition. So I elected to play first, which is a very unusual thing for a professional piper to do.*

When I finished, one of the adjudicators took the unusual step of applauding me which I took to be rather a significant sign. As I was passing him he said "That was great, that was good enough for second."

DF Thanks again Jack.