

100 Years of the Piobaireachd Society Collection

Jack Taylor and John Frater

Chair Bill Wotherspoon

The title of this talk is 100 years of the Piobaireachd Society Collection. Indeed the first volume of the collection appeared in November 1925.

There are two speakers for this presentation, both well kent faces from previous lectures at the Piobaireachd Society Conference. They will try to limet themselves within the time constraint.

First up is Dr Jack Taylor, previous President of the Piobaireachd Society, who will outline some relevant history and how the books developed.

Then we have Dr John Frater, whose talk is titled Further Adventures of a Piobaireachd Nerd. He'll explain that.

Dr Jack Taylor

Thanks Bill.

Introduction and background

Good afternoon everybody. It is a pleasure to be here. And it is a particular pleasure to see Book 1 out in front of us like that. I think that is just reminds us of what was there before that.

We know that there was Angus Mackay, with Donald MacDonald before that and Angus MacArthur before MacDonald.

Angus MacKay prevailed for a long time, then there was Glens, MacPhee, Uilleam Ross and then there was General Thomason's fantastic collection *Ceol Mor*. 300 piobaireachds, but difficult to decipher and full of mistakes.

It was that which Kilberry was referring to in the "AM" pamphlet John Mulhearn talked about. The tunes were all out there, but few of them were being played. Thomason himself lamented that in the introduction to his own book.

The Piobaireachd Society started off in 1903, to try and remedy the situation, to try and rescue and preserve Piobaireachd. I think that it is fair to say that it has probably done those things.

Whether it needs to do more now – John’s talk was thought provoking in that regard.

But I have to start on a negative note I’m sorry to say, because we have had a complaint. Now, I know that the Society is very open now to complaints. In fact, it welcomes complaints, and being a modern and progressive organisation, it even has a complaints procedure.

So we are not taking this in a heavy-hearted way at all, but nonetheless we must recognise what it is saying.

“Dear Sir,

A large sum is spent on music which is found to be incorrect. The Society is guided by a number of well-meaning enthusiasts, and it is no secret that they are blind enthusiasts on the subject of Piobaireachd music.

The competence of the Society’s judges, with one or two notable exceptions, must be a matter of grave doubt.

(Well we can immediately pass that to the SPJA.)

Why is it that a Society, whose objects are in every way admirable and deserving of the support of all lovers of Ceol Mor, has failed so lamentably?”

But fear not, we are off the hook, because it is anonymous. It was written by someone who called themselves Patrick Og.

We are off the hook as well, because it was written in 1910, by Iain Grant, who was lamenting the fact that the Piobaireachd Society had up to that point had done little to further its aims, by publishing a collection of music which was poor in some respects.

The first collection was really an attempt to standardise Piobaireachd for the purposes of competition. Of course the judges didn’t know much. They needed a book, with everything the same.

Competitively that is all very well. We have a level playing field. But musically it is atrocious. And of course, pipers, and musicians generally, do not want to be told what to do, and what to play, and how to play it.

So from that point of view that idea was a disaster.

Here is a quote from the Society’s initial statement of intent.

“So many pipers have different settings of the same tune, and they are afraid to play certain settings, in case their setting may be different to that which the judges think is the correct thing.

Piobaireachd Society 1903”

If we pick up two words from this statement . One is settings, the other is correct. We all know that in the field of traditional music, which I would argue Piobaireachd leans towards, being orally transmitted, is going to change.

Even when it gets written down, it is going to change. And that is pretty well what has happened to Piobaireachd. But at the same time, an oral tradition will help to stabilise the music as well.

I think that there is a saying that one of the best stabilisers of oral tradition is oral tradition itself. You want to play it as you were given it. You may not have much control over what happens after that, but you want to do that.

So, that was the petard upon which the early Piobaireachd Society was hoist, the dagger which stabbed it in the heart, because we know that, two years later, the Princes Salute was played, but not as written.

We heard about Bill Livingstone’s 2nd prize being withdrawn earlier. The forerunner of that was the withdrawal of 2nd priz from GS Allan in 1905, because he played it “up” and not “down”, in the first variation.

Tragedy, tragedy, awful, awful, because the rules said that you had to play it according to the Piobaireachd Society’s score.

Sings both versions

Is one more musical than the other?

So that is where the first series fell down. In my opinion the fact that they were trying tell people was the problem, as opposed to the fact that the first series itself had errors in it. It was produced by people who didn’t have full access to all the required knowledge.

There were errors, but when you look at the first series, it is not at all bad. It is written in the style of the day, and it had some errors, but perhaps no more than the current series.

Although our President and I have now eliminated all mistakes. (Laughter).

So these two young men got going. What a folly it was, they said, that they let the Angus MacKay Manuscript go to Charles Bannatyne. Charles Bannatyne was notorious – not as a Doctor because he can't have spent much time on his medicine, he was so busy writing to the Oban Times.

I think he wrote some 200 letters to the Oban Times about how he was the sole person who knew how the Gesto Canntaireachd could be translated. He was an avid collector of all things Piobaireachd, including the source manuscripts.

So Kilberry said that it was “criminal folly” that he should have the Angus MacKay MS. So Kilberry and Grant were writing to each other about the time the first series was in train.

So they said we are going to produce a score for each tune based on what we know is played currently, as best we can, also based on what sources are available to us. But we are going to include information about all available settings, as much as we can.

They were going to set about gathering as much information as possible about each tune, with a score on the left page, and notes on the right hand page.

I think that they made a good job of it.

Here are some of the quotes from correspondence between Kilberry and Ian Grant.

I am sending you the photographs of MacDonald's book

*I shall then apply for MacArthur's book (?MS) and am inclined to get it photographed on the sly. What do you think? It is **rather a criminal action**, but all for the good cause & not for private ends.*

This thing of Bartholomew's is very interesting. I wish that you could get a hold of a copy.

“Rather a criminal action” – I'd like to think that he was loose with his words. We heard some of Kilberry's language from John earlier and you've got to remember that who called his children creatures.

Whether it was criminal or not, it was all for a good cause, and what was “this thing of Bartholomew's” – it was the Campbell Canntaireachd MS which had been found by Bartholomew in a pipe box in 1901.

They felt it was so important that they had the material to work with that they thought they should own the material. This was controversial. They drew up a memorandum of agreement about what was to happen if one of them was to die, and what was to happen if both of them were to die.

So in the event of one of them dying, it was to go to the other, and if they both die, it was to go to some organisation which promoted piping.

The letters between Kilberry and Iain Grant are fascinating. There is always piping gossip.

I hope that you will manage to slip up to Oban for a couple of days rest at the Games.

Probably Lawrie's interpretation of the Blind Pipers Obstinacy would be worth listening to. And certainly the spectacle of George MacLennan marching to the said tune could not fail to be impressive.

George MacLennan did march to his Piobaireachd, at his father's instigation. His father was a Piobaireachd expert. He had written a collection of Piobaireachd in which he asserted – and he was a man from a long long line of pipers – that Piobaireachd must be played in strict time. And were it to be played in strict time people would be much more interested in it.

George MacLennan could, if he wanted, play exactly as if he was John MacDonald, according to another letter of Kilberry. He said he was astounded to hear George MacLennan playing such and such a tune. It was just as if I was listening to John MacDonald. So obviously he was such a clever musician that he could do that.

The approach of gathering all the manuscripts came in for fierce criticism by William Donaldson in his book *The Highland Pipe and Scottish Society 1850-1950*.

There were three main criticisms. One was that Kilberry and Grant ignored people like MacLennan who had pedigree in Piobaireachd. Willie Donaldson asserted that Kilberry ignored all that.

Second Donaldson said that it shouldn't be "the toffs" – and this is contrary to Kilberry's and John Mulhearn's argument that the patrons, not the players, need to be active here – it should be the Performers driving the publication of the

music. It has been performers – Angus MacKay, Donald MacDonald, who have done it before, yet here you have gentry, poor players, doing it now.

The third thing Donaldson criticised is what he called “silent changes”. The Piobaireachd Society second series is based mainly on Angus MacKay’s work, and this is clearly stated. However, Kilberry and Grant developed a style of writing which was different.

So they removed the “redundant A” from the Taorluath and Crunluath. That was one thing on which they and John and George MacLennan agreed – that there was no redundant A.

These were noted, but what was not noted in the preface of the books that they often changed Angus MacKay’s themal introductory E’s to quaver gracenotes, and hiharins were written differently too.

You could say Kilberry’s answer to such criticism was that

“I know of no-one else engaged in such a work at the moment”.

Performers he believed did not have the skills to do the work, and nothing useful had been published since Thomason’s Ceol Mor. The idea of referencing all available settings and specifying year on year that any authoritative setting could be played in competition was aimed to put an end to the idea that any one setting was the “correct” one.

What was to be in the books? The Bells of Perth. Bannatyne’s rendering was “infamous”. Bannatyne had written on the original score, so some of the *darados* were obscured, and were published as grips.

Book 1 came out in 1925/26. It contained 12 tunes, detailed on the slide. Kiberry and Grant devised the variations for the Big Spree, based on Donald MacDonald’s MS. Viscount Dundee was in Angus MacKay, but it had a missing bars and wasn’t played. This was corrected. Kilberry played it in the train to MacDougall Gillies, Willie Ross and they both had not heard it before, and liked it.

How did it go down? Well of course there were good things and bad things.

Angus MacPherson, the mildest of characters, wrote in the Oban Times that it had much to commend it, but was critical of the term Crunluath a Mach being used to show an open fosgailte after the crunluath doubling. This was not done

he said. Kilbery's answer, explained in the notes, was that his teachers said it was done in certain tunes.

The books came out every two years until the beginning of the second world war. The infamous Bells of Perth was in book 2. Two settings of Auldearn were there, number 1 having been discovered by Iain Grant in the Campbell MS. Indeed he won the SPS Strathcona cup playing that version of the tune.

Book 3 was handed over from Grant to Kilberry. It dropped the Campbell Canntaireachd translations of the scores, I think wisely.

Book 4 was a departure, containing short tunes, often with groundwork only. The preface says that some might argue that these are not true Piobaireachds, but they have become much loved.

The Oban Times commended book 5 for bringing out tunes "unfamiliar to Piobaireachd lovers", such as Grain in Hides, Sobieski's Salute and MacDougall's Gathering. It also contains Mary MacLeod. They debated whether to include it due to its popularity, but were keen to "explode the high A bogey" invented by Willie Ross, but without any written authority.

Book 6 contains the Campbell Canntaireachd setting of Massacre of Glencoe. They did not include the Angus MacKay version, because it was so well known.

It has been inserted in the most recent version, as MacKay's version is not now widely known.

Book 6 was extensively revised when David Murray was President. He and John MacLellan extended the information about different ways that tunes were written in the sources, for example by Donald MacDonald. In particular David Murray's favourite topic, the hiharin, was explored in detail.

Book 7 is full of favourites, and book 8 introduced the Big Nameless from the Campbell Canntaireachd, and, from "relative obscurity", Ronald MacDonald of Morar, Struan Robertson's Salute, Kintarbert's Fancy.

Book 9 appeared after a gap of almost 20 years. This was partly because Kiberry had thought book 8 to be the last of the series, and partly because he was compiling his own book. Book 9 contains Victorian tunes. Originally the notes were "scanty", because source material was now in the National Library. Later editors fleshed them out.

Book 10 was Kilberry's last, just a couple of years before his death. Archie Kenneth helped him with it. It was substantially revised in 2010.

Kilberry was wise, and had identified Archie Kenneth as his successor long before. He wrote, in 1947

The only successor that I can think of is Archie Kenneth.

He is keen on piping, is no fool, has got the leisure, and has a permanent residence where he can keep records papers etc.

On the other hand, he is said not to be very businesslike

Archie said to John MacLellan at a Piobaireachd Society Conference, as he scurried from room to room with a handful of papers that "there is madness in my method."

I think that sums him up well. Eccentric maybe, but he was knowledgeable, not only about Piobairachd but about many other aspects of music, and about the natural world.

He was not afraid, to quote James Campbell, to go "beyond the beaten track". Soon, again quoting Campbell "the correspondence is flying round the three corners of the triangle." Kilberry did the editing work, MacLellan was the glue, and Campbell was the patrician academic.

So books 11-15 contain many hitherto unpublished Campbell Canntaireachd tunes. They wondered about putting only unknown tunes in, but they thought better to put in known ones too – "a spoon of sugar to help the medicine go down".

Was there room for another book? Some wondered, but Andrew Wright was convinced that there was. Andrew, Alan Forbes and Ronnie Clark got together and produced book 16, which is a mix of 19th century rarities and more known tunes – you have Hail to my Country, which is perhaps the ultimate sugary tune.

Since then Robert and I have done numerous corrections of detail, have modernised fonts, put English titles before Gaelic, added Kilberry's version of Lord Lovat's Lament and MacKay's of Massacre of Glencoe, together with thirteen scores of Campbell Canntaireachd tunes. And we have removed the Crunluath a mach instruction from Lament for the Children.