



“A really musical rendering”: pìobaireachd and Robert Bell Nicol (1905-1978)

The year 2005 marks the centenary of one of the 20th century’s leading players and teachers of pìobaireachd, Robert Bell Nicol (1905-1978). The main events in piping in the year of his birth can be summarised in four pieces of contemporary evidence.

Two announcements and two letters

On 1st April 1905 the advertisements which filled the front page of the *Oban Times* included two announcements.

The first was from Scotland’s leading publisher of pipe music:

DAVID GLEN has in the Press, and will shortly publish, the THREE TEST TUNES given out by the PIOBAIREACHD SOCIETY for their this year’s Competition, together with the other THREE TUNES given in the book this society has just published. The SIX TUNES have been carefully revised and arranged, and are written in such a form that they may be read by any Musician. ... The Six Tunes, Post Free, 3/-; Single Tunes 1/- each.

The second was just below in the same column:

To Pipers. Caution. The Piobaireachd Society’s Revised Setting of Six Piobaireachd. This is the only Edition authorised by The Piobaireachd Society, and from which the competitors will be judged. Published only by Logan & Coy. Inverness. Price 3/2. Post Free.

This was placed by William Stewart of Ensay, Secretary of the Piobaireachd Society whose first volume of its new *Collection* had just been published, edited by himself.

It had been the original intention of the Society when formed two years earlier in 1903 to promote the work of its first president, Charles Simeon Thomason. His book, *Ceol Mor*, was couched in a revolutionary new system of musical shorthand devised by Thomason himself which permitted the entire tradition to be contained in a single volume and allowed the set tunes to be issued free of charge to intending competitors.

In a letter of 13th July 1905, Thomason wrote:

...The policy of the Piobaireachd Society to-day is so entirely opposed to that of its originators that ... I feel it now my duty to resign membership ... I did look to the Society to help me in reducing the cost of my book to a figure placing it within reach of poor pipers--a matter surely of the first importance: and my failure in realising these hopes has been a far greater disappointment to me than the pecuniary loss to which I own ...



Shortly afterwards the founding Secretary of the Society, James MacKillop of Polmont, framed a careful reply to Bob Nicol's future teacher John MacDonald of Inverness (1865-1953) who had enquired anxiously about his role as advisor to the Society:

... last year ... Major Stewart asked [John MacDougall] Gillies and me to revise the music, which we did very carefully. After we had done it, Major Stewart would not allow the corrections ... When the tunes were published, and people began to criticise ... Major Stewart ... said that we had revised the music, which was absurd ... I think your reputation is much too good to run the risk of being treated like this ... I ... hope you will treat this letter ... as strictly private, as I would not express my opinions to anyone on this subject, except to yourself and Gillies... (15/01/1906)

The year of Bob's birth was a momentous one for the playing of *ceòl mòr*. The issues which would dominate competitive playing throughout the twentieth century were formulated that year: namely who decided what the pipers could play and on what "authority."

Early piping career

Bob Nicol was born at West Lodge, Durris, on 26th December 1905 and was brought up along with his older brother and sister on Deeside where their father worked as a fishing ghillie. Deeside was a famous place for pipers, and it was just a short journey via Drum railway station to the city of Aberdeen where the great Pipe Major G. S. McLennan was to be based for many years. Bob was eight years old when the Great War began and demand for pipers was heavy. The Gordons advertised for a Pipe Major promising: 'Home service only if required' and also for pipers with the offer: 'State the amount of extra pay required.'

Bob began to learn piping at the age of seven and his first teacher was called MacKellar (a pupil of John MacDougall Gillies) who was killed in the 1914-18 war. His next teacher was Charles Ewen of Aberdeen. In about 1920 Bob left the local school to begin his career as a gamekeeper, first on the nearby estate of Lord Cowdray and from 1924 with the British Royal family at their Scottish estate, Balmoral, on upper Deeside.

Bob was competing by the age of sixteen when the *Oban Times* reported "Piper R. B. Nicol, Drumoak" coming third in the Piobaireachd Society's competition at the Argyllshire Gathering in 1922. His work at Balmoral began under the direction of the estate factor, Sir Douglas Ramsay of Bamff, brother-in-law of the Duke of Atholl and a leading member of the Piobaireachd Society whose chief instructor from its early years had been John MacDonald. In 1926 Bob Nicol, travelled to Inverness for his first lessons with "Old Johnnie," then aged 60, the most famous player and teacher in Scotland and at the height of his powers. The following year he went together with Bob Brown for a month of lessons lasting several hours a day and on several days of each week. Their lessons with "Old Johnny" continued for fourteen years, ending only with the outbreak of World War II.

In 1927 Bob was placed fourth in the Gold Medal at the Northern Meeting and also gained second in the marches and third in the strathspeys and reels. The judges were Archibald Campbell, J. P. Grant of Rothiemurchus, Seton Gordon and Somerled MacDonald. The *Oban Times* reported:



Nicol, the King's piper from Balmoral, who did so well a fortnight ago at the Braemar Gathering seemed to suffer from the cold...[R. U.] Brown, another piper from Balmoral, who has been playing well of late, played the "Blind Piper's Obstinacy" too slowly, and lost his place in the tune. (24/09/1927)

Two years later at the Argyllshire he was reported as "very good, but his playing was on the slow side." Bob went on to win both the Oban and Inverness gold medals in 1930, followed by the Clasp in 1932 with "The Nameless Tune." By the age of 26 he had established himself as one of the top players of the younger generation. He was in distinguished company. George McLennan had died in 1929 but other leading competing pipers of the time included his teacher, John MacDonald, and Willie Ross, Robert Reid, John Wilson and Malcolm R. Macpherson.

Prizes and problems

More prizes followed, including the Scottish Piping Society of London's Gillies Cup in 1938 and the Bratach Gorm in 1939. But competition success meant following closely the set scores of the Piobaireachd Society and the inaccuracy and poor musical quality of these had become a problem. John MacDonald alluded to this when reporting back on his work for the Piobaireachd Society to Archibald Campbell in June 1938:

Dear Sir,

I have started a class in Glasgow which [?ends in the] first week in July. The members are the two MacDonalds, Glasgow Police, C Scott, ditto, MacNab, ditto, and Johnstone, ditto, Hector MacLean, Glasgow, Hugh Kennedy, ditto, and Mr MacColl of the Scottish Pipers, Edinburgh. I expect some others will look in by and by but these are quite sufficient for a start. They are very keen and are working hard. I am teaching Kinlochmoidart No. 1 as taught by Sandy Cameron, Malcolm MacPherson, Gillies, etc with the accent on the low A in Taorluath Breabach and not on the last note in each group and Kinlochmoidart No 2 (with the doubling & Siubhal tripling in the orthodox way, instead of using the Taorluath Mach on the B's. Perhaps you will kindly let me have your views on this as I should be very sorry if any of the pupils would be penalised by playing my setting.

Problems were reported at the Argyllshire in September of that year when several competitors experienced difficulties trying to play "Isabel Mackay" from the set score: The *Oban Times* noted that "[Bob Nicol was] rather slow and uninspired and he was placed second. John MacDonald of the Glasgow Police was third, also playing Isabella MacKay, but the judges did not like his style of rendering the tune. The same observation applies to most of those who played this composition. They seemed to find difficulty in giving a really musical rendering." (17/09/1938)

John MacDonald wrote to Seton Gordon:

13 January 1939

I don't see why the P.S. Music Committee do so much altering of the tunes they publish ... unfortunately these go down to posterity as the correct settings ... There are not many left now who can corroborate what I say ...



But Old Johnnie's anxiety about the wellbeing of the music soon became concern for the very survival of his leading pupils as he waited through yet another world war for news of their safety. In August 1940 he wrote to Seton Gordon:

Nicol is somewhere in England, and I heard Brown is missing, although this is not confirmed (05/08/1940)

Bob Nicol was serving with the Gordon Highlanders as Pipe Major of the 11th (later 2nd) Battalion. He saw active service in France, Belgium and Holland and kept in touch with Johnnie who wrote to Seton Gordon:

Had a short note from Nicol recently, he is out with the B.W.E.F. He tells me Brown is in the first line, and now has no band. Nicol met MacLeod of the Seaforths who he says, plays well. They were comparing notes during their meeting. Nicol says his own playing is going back as one "cannot concentrate in this sordid country." (13/11/1944)

As we know, all three survived the war. Bob Nicol was able to spend his time awaiting demobilisation as senior instructor at a piobaireachd school set up at Lübeck in Germany by General Frank Richardson. He was often visited by Bob Brown who was stationed nearby in Hamburg.

In June 1951 the Highlands and Islands Festival Society held two recitals of music at Inverness Castle given by Pipe Majors Brown and Nicol and Donald MacLeod, Seaforth Highlanders. Later that same year Bob Nicol and Donald MacLeod played at the 70th anniversary dinner of the Royal Scottish Pipers on 26th November. There were speeches from Lord James Stewart Murray on "Danger to Piping Tradition" and an appeal from the Chief of Staff, Scottish Command, Major-General G. F. Johnson, for pipers to join the regular army. The General thought all regiments were short of players because "National servicemen did not stay long enough to become good pipers...."

The militarization of British society had proceeded apace through the two world wars and institutional support for piping was increasingly seen in terms of recruitment and morale in the armed forces. It would be more than 20 years after National Service ended in Britain before the Piobaireachd Society A. G. M. of 13th March 1983 decided to alter their rules to enable "the use of first names rather than military ranks" when members addressed one another. John MacDonald counselled against spending time and money on "purely military piping" and saw himself as one of the few still alive who could bear testimony to the changes that had been made in the idiom of the music.

Privately Archibald Campbell sought to undermine John MacDonald's reputation. In 1947 he wrote:

It has got to this; that one is apt to hear the young amateur say "I don't know what this talk about John MacDonald is. I have not heard him play, but look at the stuff his pupils play." (23/10/1947)



This may have been prompted by MacDonald expressing more openly his negative assessment of Campbell as an editor. Writing to Seton Gordon in 1949, MacDonald had said that:

Kilberry's Book...is the beginning of the end of our traditional Piobaireachd playing"
(28/01/1949)

John MacDonald died on 6 June 1953, aged 87. He was buried on 8th April at Cluny Hill Cemetery, Forres, Bob Nicol playing "The Lament for Donald Ban" at the graveside.

New Opportunities

John MacDonald's pupils were keen to make amends for the failure to record his playing during the 1930s. Bob Nicol and Bob Brown had already before his death made two trial recordings in Aberdeen in April 1952 and 1953, with publisher Robin Lorimer, a Piobaireachd Society member and associate of J. P. Grant. These must be amongst the earliest tape recordings made of Scottish pipe music. Lorimer returned in November 1953 to make further recordings of their playing at Braemar on behalf of the School of Scottish Studies, the recently founded folklore archive at the University of Edinburgh. Aware that this would be treated as permanent testimony of the way they played, the Bobs were most unhappy that conditions did not show them at their best and that they had no opportunity to re-record. The Braemar tapes were eventually released as part of a Pibroch series on the Tangent label in 1977. The limitations of the conditions were acknowledged in the notes:

Since the snow was unusually late that winter hind-shooting was still in progress away up at the head of Glen Muick. Before every recording session Pipe-Majors Brown and Nicol had both travelled ten or fifteen miles on the hill. Then they had bicycled [probably motor bikes in actuality] from Birkhall or Balmoral to Braemar and although the shooting lodge presented no insoluble acoustic problems it was always so cold that recording could not be prolonged.

Bob Nicol said the lodge was unheated and the temperatures were sub-zero. The School of Scottish Studies catalogue also lists recordings of the Bobs made by various others, Francis Collinson briefly in 1956, Neville MacKay in 1968, 1972 and 1976 and Dr. Kim Chambers in 1977. The School's Calum MacLean apparently also recorded Bob Nicol in South Uist in 1956, but this is not listed in their archive.

After Bob Brown's death in 1972 Bob Nicol found increased demand for his teaching and encouraged his pupils to make cassette tape recordings of their lessons on the understanding that they would share them freely and would not use them for profit, often saying of his own mastery of the tradition: "it cam' for nothing, and it will go for nothing." It was during this period that he also committed to tape sung versions from the books of the *Piobaireachd Society Collection* (Second Series) as it then existed (books 1-12) for a leading member of the Society.

Bob was equally enthusiastic about the reprinting of the great published piobaireachd collections, which had long been unobtainable. His own copy of *Ceol Mor*, with all his teaching notes from John MacDonald, had been stolen from Balmoral and he bitterly



regretted its loss. He spoke of how Old Johnny had prized these great works and had referred the Bobs particularly to his father, Sandy MacDonald's, settings in Uilleam Ross's *Collection*. When cheap photo-reproduction arrived in the early 1970s, a small English firm, EP of Wakefield, Yorkshire, began to issue reprints of the classic pìobaireachd collections, beginning with Angus MacKay in 1972. Bob's information on Thomason's *Ceol Mor* was then sent to EP with an enquiry as to whether they would be interested in doing it also. In the end they went on to reprint Donald MacDonald in 1974 and Thomason in 1975. In response to their interest in further suggestions, Bob supplied information on Ross, MacPhee and Glen. In 1976, Uilleam Ross's *Collection* duly appeared, with Donald MacPhee in 1978. The editions quickly sold out, but EP was taken over by another firm before they could be reissued, and unfortunately before they reached David Glen's *Ancient Piobaireachd* which was next on the list. Even so one great obstacle to knowledge of the traditional stylings was, at least briefly, overcome.

As a reedmaker, too, Bob was keen on new developments and was talking of the possibility of drone reeds with a plastic shell, cane blade and adjustable metal bridle years before such things actually began to appear on the market.

Lessons from Bob

From 1953 to 1958 Bob Nicol taught classes for the Piobaireachd Society in the Uists. But their main instructor was Bob Brown who kept up a regular correspondence with Archibald Campbell and J. P. Grant on "acceptable" interpretations of the set tunes from year to year. Bob Brown was awarded the MBE for his services to piping in 1968. Illness appears to have removed Bob Nicol from the scene for several years around this time. During this period pipers in search of tuition for the set competition tunes generally went to Bob Brown, as I did also on two or three occasions. But since nobody of my generation seemed to be going to Bob Nicol, I thought it important to get a rounded view and in 1969 I asked him if he would teach me. As a teacher, Bob Nicol was virtuosically good: he is reported on one occasion to have conducted a lesson with a group of pupils involving thirteen different pìobaireachds. Like all good teachers, he started where the pupil was. If you wanted to compete, he taught the set tunes. If you wanted, as I did, to explore the range of the tradition he was equally willing to help. Throughout he stressed that pupils should become independent in their learning. I continued to study with him until late in 1977.

Bob refused to charge for lessons, though he was not opposed to this in principle and recommended me to another master teacher who did charge when I was in the south, saying "mention my name." He respected the privacy of his pupils and I never heard him comment on the progress of another, except for occasional words of praise such as "X is playing well" if the person was known to us both. But much news passed through his house and the doings of the piping establishment were a constant source of sardonic and mirthful comment. He took a dim view of the College of Piping and Seumas MacNeill in particular. There were entertaining accounts of famous pipers he had known and jokes about the link between the competition success of North American pipers and the judges' interest in summer-school teaching. Asked in the mid 1970's if he himself might be judging any major competitions that year he retorted "Na, na, they winna ask me; I'm *oot*." With his usual laconic wit he summed



up why Thomason's work had been virtually erased from the record:

They threw him out of the Piobaireachd society...(pause)...for knowing too much.

Thomason's composition "Hail to my Country" was a favourite of Bob's and he played it as a farewell to his pupils after teaching in Brittany in the summer of 1972.

Bob taught predominantly by singing, but there was constant dialogue with the printed sources and he would refer to "MacKay" or "Ross" or "Thomason" (having I think eventually inherited Bob Brown's copy of *Ceol Mor*) or to "the book," by which he meant the Piobaireachd Society volumes, or to "Kilberry" which meant *The Kilberry Book of Ceol Mor*. He had a low opinion of the *Kilberry Book*, and stressed John MacDonald's crushingly negative judgement of it: "Piobaireachd is dead, Nicol, and *that* is its epitaph."

Bob was enthusiastic about the new cheap cassette tape recorders and the opportunity they represented to preserve, as John MacDonald used to say, "the lights and shades of the music." But he saw the danger of tape being used to stifle a thoughtful approach to the art by merely being substituted for "the book" as a single source of infallible authority. He regarded the tapes simply as an aid to further study, and emphasised that they must not be parroted.

When going through a tune Bob would indicate clearly "this is the way that ever I had it from old John" or, with equal precision, "I never got this from John but this is the way I would play it myself." He pointed out that John MacDonald sometimes played tunes differently from the way he taught the Bobs, but would not let them play what they saw as these more musically pleasing styles and would not explain why. Bob Nicol had kept his extensive correspondence with John MacDonald but destroyed this in the final years of his life.

Bob did not put everything onto tape and after a few years, realising that I was forgetting some of the stories, I began to keep a written diary of what he told me and of his teaching methods. Some of this experience is described in *Pipers* (pp.14-15 and 131-141). Further information from the diary will be posted during the current Set Tunes series to mark the centenary of his birth. As the years have advanced, these notes have proved increasingly useful as a record of what actually happened and what Bob Nicol's views actually were, as opposed to relying on decades-old memories or the selective hindsight of later accounts.

Bob Nicol died on 4 April, 1978 and was buried in the family grave at Kirkton of Durris on the southern bank of the River Dee beside his parents and elder sister Jean (as sister Sarah Jane was known; she had provided hospitality for many piping visitors to Bob for whom she kept house after their mother died); his brother David whose career was with the police force in Lancashire, England, and his sister-in-law Eunice. The stone bears this inscription:



IN LOVING MEMORY OF
DAVID NICOL
DIED 12TH APRIL 1934 AGED 73
HIS WIFE
MARY MCDONALD
DIED 27TH APRIL 1956 AGED 94
HIS DAUGHTER
SARAH JANE
DIED 15TH MARCH 1972 AGED 67
HIS SON
ROBERT BELL
DIED 4TH APRIL 1978 AGED 72
LATE P/M 2ND GORDONS
AND BALMORAL CASTLE
ALSO HIS DAUGHTER IN LAW
ANN EUNICE WARD
DIED 21ST APRIL 1986 AGED 86
WIFE OF
DAVID NICOL
WHO DIED 10TH JULY 1989
AGED 87 YEARS

The next 25 years

Shortly after Bob's death the Balmoral Schools of North America were established in 1979. The Schools state simply their aim of following the high teaching standards of the Bobs of Balmoral, with regard to "both their musicianship and their character as individuals." This is a fair summary of their legacy.

Bob Nicol's reputation assumed another dimension as sections in Scotland with which he had little connection, or had actually condemned, during his lifetime began to use his work to support their own agendas. He had always deplored the poor musical quality of the scores set for competition and urged greater variety of interpretation. But within a generation of his death his work was being used to promote a new orthodoxy in piobaireachd playing based on fixed audio rather than written or printed sources. This was very far from his intention.

Where next?

After Bob died, it was clear from his teaching what should happen next. He presented the taped lessons simply as an aid, to encourage the wider programme of study and playing necessary to develop a thoughtful individual style and a good understanding of the art. This led, in my case, to playing my way through the EP edition of Thomason's *Ceol Mor*, noting the differences with the published scores of MacKay, MacDonald, and so on, moving on to the manuscript sources, starting with Colin Cameron and then Colin Mór Campbell, the MacArthur/MacGregor, Donald MacDonald, Peter Reid, Angus MacKay and their successors. This led in turn to my books and articles on piping and the present Set Tunes Series. Without Bob Nicol this could not have happened.

Music examples for the current series have been typeset using "Music Publisher 5" by Braeburn Software of Selkirk. MP3 files are available for all of the tunes in the current series. They were



created using GoldWave v5.10 (© GoldWave Inc. 2005). I am indebted to the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland for access to copies of the manuscript sources.

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