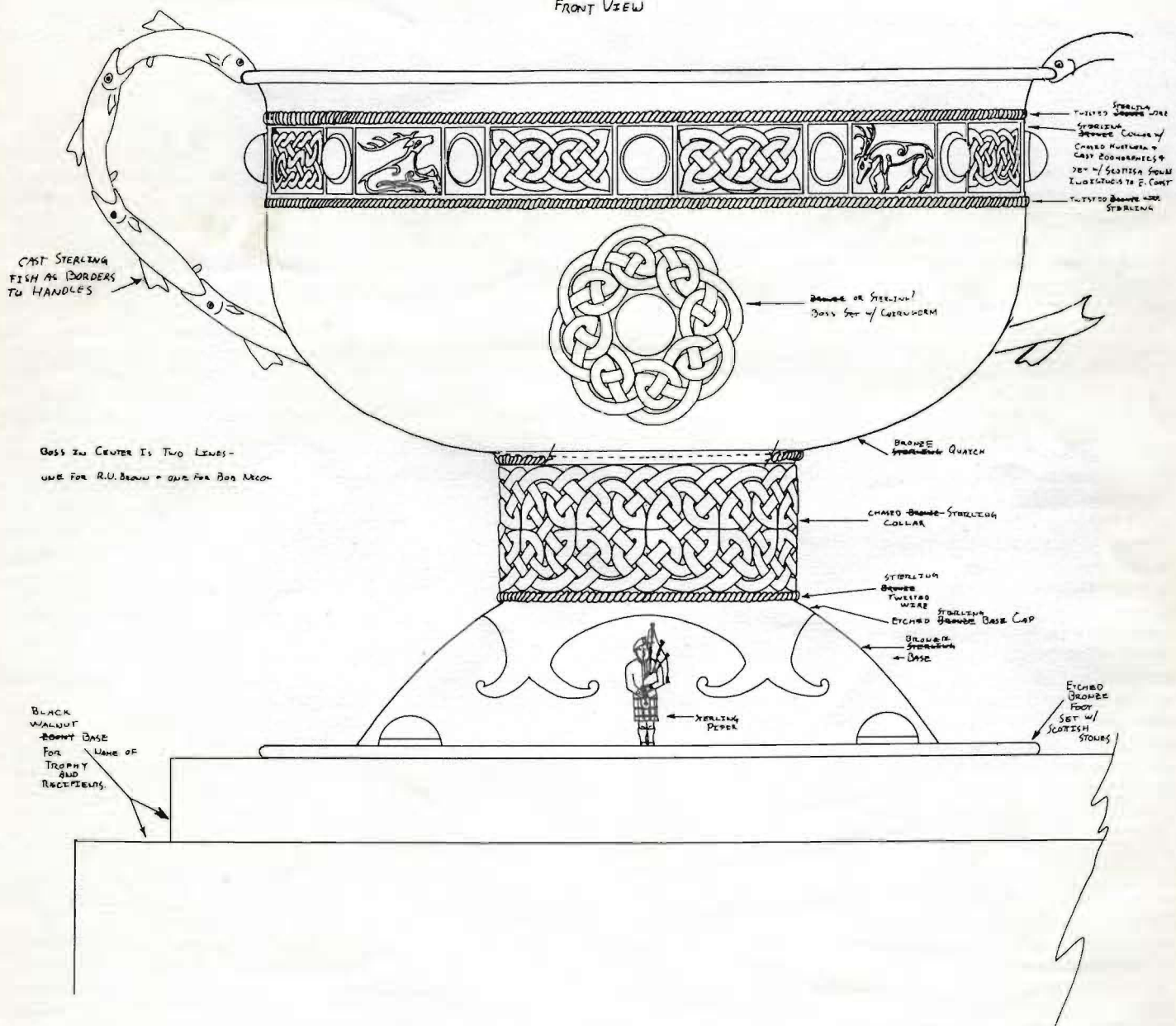


# The Robert Nicol - Robert Brown Amateur Invitational Piobaireachd:

FRONT VIEW



Friday, May 11, 1984

Brooks-Rogers Recital Hall  
Williams College



**Robert U. Brown**

Bob Brown was born in 1906 in Aberdeenshire, of a family which had long shown a keen interest in all the music of Scotland. He received his first instruction on the bagpipe from William Fraser, a pupil of G.S. MacLennan, who although suffering from a physical handicap acquired during the first world war, was still considered a fine player. Next the young Brown passed on to Jonathan Ewen, an Inverness Medallist, who began for him his life-long study of ceol mor. Ewen was a pupil of Sandy Cameron, so it was not surprising that his young pupil began to win a number of competitions in his local county. This brought him to the attention of G.S. Allan, who took him under his wing, and in particular accompanied him to the Argyllshire Gathering in 1925, where he won the junior piobaireachd. The following year he was unplaced but highly commended in the gold medal event.

Although he was a keen competitor and loved the excitement of the boards, Bob Brown did not always find it easy to get time off from his work—which is surprising in view of the fact that his employers have always been enthusiasts for piping. It was in fact 1931 before he was able to return to Oban, and this time he won the medal. By then, however, he was the holder of the Inverness medal, which he gained in 1928.

This was also the year when, according to Bob, there occurred the most important event in his piping life—he began to take lessons from John MacDonald. "I owe my knowledge," said Bob Brown once, "to John MacDonald who made me the piobaireachd enthusiast that I am." Certainly it is partly through his long and close association with John MacDonald that he came to be looked on as a great authority, but this was also due to his own clear and reasoned expositions on his subject, and his unfailing ability to produce great music whenever he played.

His fame and his standing increased as time went on. In the last decade\* he became better known than ever before, partly because pipers began beating a path to the door of his cottage at Balmoral and partly because he began taking his knowledge to different parts of the world. For several years he was the instructor at Invermark summer school in New York state, he visited South Africa, and it was while he was in Australia that the first signs came of the ailment which was to prove so quickly fatal. His one thought was to get back to his beloved forests and mountains, but within a few hours of reaching home he was dead.

\*Before his death in 1972.

## DEDICATION

Robert U. Brown and Robert B. Nicol ("The Bobs of Balmoral") shared a deep and abiding enthusiasm for piobaireachd from boyhood days. Out of their affiliation with John MacDonald, Inverness, grew a life-long commitment to the teaching and perpetuation of *ceol mor*.

As musicians and world citizens, their lives remain an inspiration to pipers everywhere.

We are pleased to dedicate the Williams College Amateur Invitational Piobaireachd to their memory.



**Robert B. Nicol**

Bob was born in 1905 at Durris, Aberdeenshire, and was first taught by a piper MacKellar, a pupil of MacDougall Gilies, who was later killed in the 1914-18 war. He was then taught by one of the Ewen brothers. The other brother, Jonathan, at that time was teaching the then young Bob Brown who was later to become Bob Nicol's life-long friend. He had a successful junior career and his first piping appointment was as piper to Lord Cowdray at Dunecht. It was from here that he moved to Balmoral as King George V's piper in 1924.

In 1926 when only 20 years old he had a shooting accident that resulted in the loss of his right eye, a shot from a fellow gamekeeper ricocheted off a frozen tree and hit him in the eye.

Later in 1926 King George V was anxious to have Bob given the best tuition and he consulted the factor at Balmoral, Sir Douglas Ramsay,

and Sheriff Grant, Rothiemurchus, themselves both John MacDonald pupils. As a result Bob Nicol was sent to Inverness to John MacDonald for a month that same year, and a nerve-racking time it was, as Bob relates. "When John MacDonald came into the room he gave me a good dressing-down for a start. He said, 'You're no use to me.' In fact he was quite nasty to

Robert Brown and Robert Nicol thought alike and the following statement by Robert Brown captures their feelings: *"When I play a pibroch, I try to relive deeply the event for which it was composed. I try to understand what the piece signifies and what it depicts. I get an enormous pleasure researching the meaning and being conscious of it, while I play. Once G.S. Allan taught me the tunes with cantairachd, I would hear it in my head while I executed the piece."* Translation from J. Pincet's *Musique Pour Cornemuol-livre II*

me for the whole month." But on the completion of his course a very good report was sent to Balmoral.

The following year he was accompanied by Bob Brown, and the visits continued every year until 1939. During this period Bob became one of the outstanding players, winning all the top honours including the Gold Medal at Inverness and Oban in 1930 and the Clasp in 1932. His medal tune at Inverness was "Lament for Donald Ban MacCrimmon," a tune he was later to play at the graveside of both John MacDonald and Bob Brown.

Throughout the 1939-45 war he served as pipe-major in the 2nd Gordons and ran a piobaireachd class for the 15th Scottish Division. He also taught at schools in America and Brittany.

He was a very good and firm teacher, a very likeable man with a sharp wit and pawky sense of humour. Dedicated to keeping the traditional piobaireachd alive he was undoubtedly one of the greatest and most knowledgeable men of our time.

Bob Nicol died in 1978.

(These are excerpts from Vol. 24, No. 10 and Vol. 30, No. 9 of *Piping Times*.)

## PIOBAIREACHD

*"Piobaireachd music, or ceol mor, in all probability is not the oldest form of pipe music, but it has been regarded by the expert performers as the most important form."*

*"Piobaireachd is played with a combination of accuracy and expression. It is a highly artificial product governed by rigid rules of construction."* (Quoted from the Introduction to the Kilberry Book of Ceol Mor by Archibald Campbell).

"Piobaireachd" is a Gaelic word which literally means the playing of pipe music (Piob means Pipe. Piobaire means Piper). The music for the Great Highland Bagpipe falls into three general categories:

1. Ceol Mor meaning Big Music
2. Ceol Meadhonach meaning Middle Music (Slow Airs, Jigs)
3. Ceol Beag meaning Little Music (Marches, Strathspeys, Reels)

Ceol Mor is the classical music of this instrument and is most often referred to today as Piobaireachd. This is the music which requires the highest degree of musicianship to perform well, and thus it taxes the player to the limit of his/her abilities in expression, finger technique, interpretation, etc. with each performance.

A Piobaireachd starts with a slow theme or groundwork called the Urlar and

then proceeds on to variations of the theme. Whilst the number and types of variations differ from one tune to another, as a general rule they become increasingly more difficult and complex in finger technique (execution). Almost without exception, every tune finishes with the variation which requires a most intricate finger movement called the Crunluath ("Crun"—Crown) and, having gradually built the tune to arrive at this exciting variation, it takes the ultimate in finger technique and stamina to execute this movement continually throughout the variation without a fault. It should be noted that whilst the average March or Strathspey and Reel takes but approximately two and 2½ minutes respectively to play, the average Piobaireachd takes about 10-12 minutes. Thus, having played continually for perhaps eight or nine minutes, the performer is then faced with the formidable task presented by the Crunluath Variation.

Piobaireachd is probably not the original form of music for the Highland Bagpipe, but it is certainly the most highly developed. No definite date can be affixed for the birth of Ceol Mor, but it is known that this was the main type of music which was played by the best pipers in Scotland from the latter part of the 16th century to the early 1900's.

(An excerpt from the Ottawa Piping Club's program for their Eighth Open Piobaireachd Competition at Carleton University.)

### The contestants, in order of play, are:

Tune

- |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                             |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Stuart Lowe (Ontario).....</li> <li>2. Bob Minnear (Georgia).....</li> <li>3. Sean Moran (New York).....</li> <li>4. Scott Lowe (Ontario).....</li> <li>5. David Bailiff (Maryland).....</li> <li>6. Mike Rogers (Maryland).....</li> <li>7. Brian Williamson (Ontario).....</li> <li>8. Ian MacDonald (Ontario).....</li> <li>9. John Wassman (New Jersey).....</li> <li>10. June Mitchell (North Carolina).....</li> </ol> | <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|

The Alternates are:

- |                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                         |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sean Turner (New Jersey).....</li> <li>2. Ken Garson (Ontario).....</li> <li>3. Tom Archambault (New York).....</li> <li>4. Donald Dixon (Connecticut).....</li> </ol> | <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|

Results

- |                                                                                                                        |                                     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1st</li> <li>2nd</li> <li>3rd</li> <li>4th</li> <li>5th</li> <li>6th</li> </ol> | <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|

**BRIAN YATES** has designed and continues to work on the Brown-Nicol Chalice. He is a twenty-six-year-old piper, metal worker and student of Celtic art residing in Ossining, New York. Brian has studied the language of Celtic art under Mark Van Stone of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, the most knowledgeable person on the subject today. His education as a craftsman has primarily come from Betsy Rogers, a silversmith and jewelry maker. Brian looks forward to a full-time career in the arts, supporting himself with the sale of prints, etchings, metal works, and jewelry.

**THE BROWN-NICOL CHALICE**, inspired by the Ardagh Chalice, stands as a symbol of the pursuit of excellence in Celtic art and piobaireachd. "It is incongruous not to have pipe music and Celtic art together," says Brian Yates.

"The music is worthy of its own genre of art. Brown's and Nicol's playing was lucid in the highly structured framework of piobaireachd. I've attempted to pursue the same course within the strict traditions of Celtic art."

**MURRAY HENDERSON** began piping at the age of 6. He received his principal tuition in piping from his father, Donald Bain, Dave Boyle and since 1973, James McIntosh. His numerous awards include the Lion in Scotland and gold medals in Braemar, Oban, Inverness, and the Grants Championship. He has given recitals and taught in New Zealand, Canada, the United States, Brittany, Scotland and Australia. He immigrated to the U.S. in 1983 and currently resides in Elkton, MD.

# HISTORICAL REVIEW OF THE WILLIAMS COLLEGE INVITATIONAL PIOBAIREACHD

In recognition of the continuing development of piping standards in North America, Williams College Students established the First Annual Williams College Amateur Invitational Piobaireachd on April 2, 1982.

This special event has been dedicated to Robert Brown and Robert Nicol ("The Bobs of Balmoral") who shared a deep and abiding enthusiasm for piobaireachd. It was out of their affiliation with John MacDonald, Inverness, that their life-long commitment to the teaching and perpetuation of ceol mor grew. As musicians and world citizens, their lives remain an inspiration to pipers everywhere. It is upon the shoulders of these great teachers and authorities on piobaireachd that today's pipers and instructors stand.

Modeled after Scotland's Oban and Inverness competition, the "Olympics of Piping", the Invitational competition allows the young and enthusiastic top amateur pipers a prestigious competition which has set a standard by which to judge their piping and a goal to direct their hours of practice. This Invitational has become a respected place to play and hear piobaireachd in the United States.

Piobaireachd, classical pipe music, is seldom given its own stage or a fair hearing due to the difficulty and intricacy of the piping tunes. In order to produce piobaireachd of the highest standards, only top-ranked players from the United States and Canada have been invited. It is hope in the future that this Invitational competition will be extended to outstanding competitors throughout the world. The environment is the best possible in which to play and appreciate the finest piobaireachd music.

The Williams Pipe Band commissioned Brian Yates, an American piper and silversmith, to craft a chalice in honor of the late Robert Brown and Robert Nicol, pipers to the royal Family at Balmoral. The top competitor's name is inscribed on the Brown-Nicol Memorial Chalice. To date Nancy Crutcher (1982) and Ian Beatty (1983) have held this honor. Judging these events have been well known leading exponents of piobaireachd, Edward Neigh (1982), James MacGillivray (1983), and this year Murray Henderson. The Chalice will remain on display at Williams College with its list of winners in future years standing as a symbol of the best in North American piping.

## The Robert Nicol - Robert Brown Amateur Invitational Committee thanks the following Patrons for making this event possible.

1983

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Lee and Ian Beatty  
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1984

Herbert Armitt  
Tom Atkins  
George G. Balderose  
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Peter Beckford  
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The British Shop  
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### Special Thanks to:

The Robert Nicol-Robert Brown  
Amateur Invitational Committee

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Donald Lindsay  
Peter Beckford

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College Development Office  
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Robert Tunicliff-Photography  
Terry Gallagher-Steward  
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Note: We are now building an endowment for the Invitational. Anyone wishing to be a Patron may send their tax-deductable contribution to: Williams College, Box 231, Williamstown, Massachusetts 01267.