

THE ROBERT NICOL - ROBERT BROWN

PIOBAlREACHD

AND

THE WILLIAM ROSS CHALLENGE

MARCH, STRATHSPEY AND REEL

AMATEUR INVITATIONAL

COMPETITIONS

SATURDAY

TROY SAVINGS BANK MUSIC HALL

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*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 Medalist, 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 this 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.

## **ROBERT B. NICOL**

Bob was born in 1905 at Durriss, 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, Rothie-murchus, 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 tart. He said, 'You're no use to me.' In fact he was quite nasty to 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 honors 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

the 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 greats 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.

## **PIPE MAJOR WILLIAM ROSS, M.B.E.**

Pipe Major William Ross, born 1879, died 1965, learned his early piping from his father and mother. There is no evidence that William Ross was tutored by other than his own family, his father, mother, and his uncle, Aneas Rose, who guided his early steps in Piobaireachd. Thus by his own great musical ability Pipe Major Ross rose to the top of his chosen profession. His Northern Meeting record in Ceol Mor and Ceol Beag is so far unsurpassed and his name is a household one among pipers. Music flowed from William Ross' pipe and fingers with no apparent effort - "the mighty frame seemed hardly to need to blow". It was the simplicity of the true expert - like the golf swing of a master - of how easy it looks until we try to do it ourselves. Unlike so many pipers, success never spoiled him, and if ever one needed a tonic, an hour in the company of the illustrious Pipe-Major would assure a cure for the ailment. He was peerless in conversation, a

Prince of Story-tellers. He loved human beings and was loved by them in return. In his life and work Willie Ross was a delightful example of the perfect gentlemen. By his courtesy, his modesty and his professional ability he left upon the sands of time an indelible honored name that will live down the ages and cheer the hearts of those who will yet listen to the recordings of his lovely music.

He joined the Scots Guards in 1896 and from that date until his retirement in 1957 as tutor to the Army Class he served piping and pipers. In 1920 he was appointed Principal of the new Army School of Piping at Edinburgh Castle. After his retirement from the Army, it was in 1921 that he became the Piobaireachd Society's tutor, and through his appointment pipers both military and civilian were able to benefit from his tuition. His pupils are scattered throughout the world and always provided the cream of the piping world with many champions amongst them. The world of piping has not only been made up of players, teachers, and composers, there have been those who worked to make the music of the pipe available to the piper, and those who worked to ensure that the great heritage was passed on. William Ross's collection of pipe music remains the mainstay and guide of many pipers.

(These are excerpts from *Piping Times*, Vol 8 #9 June 1966; *A Highlander Looks Back*, Angus MacPherson; *Scots Guard Book 1*; *Pipers Handbook*, J.A. MacLellan)

## "PIOBAlREACHD"

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 2 1/2 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 Crunlauth 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.

(From *Ottawa Piping Club's program, Eighth Open Piobaireachd Competition at Carleton University.*)

Notes from "The Piobaireachd as performed in the Highlands until the year 1808" by Ian M'Lennan.

**MUSIC** is the language of sounds, the art of expressing sentiments by means of pleasing sounds. Music is the divine art, and by it Trepander (675 BC) in Sparta, and Pythagoras (497 BC), in all Greece, exercised powerful influence with the inhabitants and excited the youth to heroic deeds.

**EXPRESSION:** The soul of musical art is the act of rendering music so as to make the vehicle of deep and pure emotion; the bringing out the full signification of a piece of music; the clothing of the music in life and warmth, in beauty and proportion. The mere notes of a composition are cold, mechanical things. It is for the performer to breath passion into them by skill of touch, acting with taste upon the impulses of the mind and feeling. The performer must play the notes clearly, pay strict attention to emphasis, accent, and rhythm. A

few musical artists say that expression is entirely a matter for the impulse and spontaneous feeling of the performer and that rules are impossible. It is true that feeling is the basis of all expression, but it is a fact that there are general principles which can be formulated, while the artistic faculty may be trained and brought out by a course of carefully guided practice.

**PHRASING** is the giving expression and feeling to a piece of music, bringing into prominence, and the proper rendering of the musical divisions of a melody; "the intelligent playing of a piece of music giving due emphasis to the notes. The intelligent rendering of a literary composition depends chiefly on accentuation and pronunciation, so does musical phrasing depend on the relative strength of sounds." The phrasing of a melody is a point of the utmost importance in good playing.

"The performer should seek in every time some culminating note where the music gives the most intense feeling and expression and study it until satisfied it will leave a marked impression on the audience, and for this purpose the movements and dispositions of the fingers of instrumentalists must be with taste, strength, and agility.

***Sound of the Northwest wind  
blowing through leafless  
trees: The piper's chilled  
fingers***

*Anonymous Patron*

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 cant-aireachd, I would hear it in my head while I executed the piece."

Translation from *J. Pincet's Musique Pour Cornemuol-livre II*

## **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 competitions, the "Olympics of Piping", this 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 North American amateur piobaireachd players have been invited to compete. It is hoped that 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.

In October of 1986 the William Ross Challenge MSR competition was added to the slate of competitions in honor of P/M William Ross, and in 1990 a 6/8 March competition. This year two additional competitions will be held on Sunday, October 13, 1991. These will be a single composer 5-7 minute medley competition - this year will feature Donald MacLeod, and a 20th Century Piobaireachd Competition.

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 as well as the Silver Belt Buckle for the 6/8 March Competition.

In 1987 we commissioned Mr. Fred Graham, Scottish Celtic Armourer and Silversmith of the "Royal Mile" in Edinburgh, Scotland to make the targe in honor of the late P/M William Ross. The 1st winner of the targe was Alasdair Wright, Kitchner, Ontario

Judges for these events have included Amy Garson, Murray Henderson, Ed Krintz, Donald Lindsay, William Livingstone, James MacGillivray, Seamus MacNeill, Edward Neigh, Chip Reardon, and this year Colin MacLellan.

THE NICOL-BROWN CHALICE COMMITTEE  
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