

# Balance is Essential

LESSONS WITH DONALD MACLEOD

■ *by Iain MacDonald*

FEATURE

**P**IPE MAJOR DONALD MACLEOD, MBE IS A legendary name in piping. Even better than the legend, was the person. Donald was kind, witty, encouraging, and a gifted player, composer and teacher. His legacy of teaching and composing carries on today through his recently released recordings, his books, and his many students. One of those students was Iain MacDonald from Saskatchewan, who kept a journal of his time with the ‘master.’

The summer I was 12, I attended the Saskatchewan Summer School of the Arts at Fort San, Saskatchewan. Like most 12-year-old boys, I was looking forward to two weeks of camp: piping, sun, girls (I hoped), and mischief. As I recall, all of it worked out except the girls. That summer I was also to meet a man who would influence my life for the next 30 years, and beyond.

The guest instructor that year was Donald MacLeod, not long retired from the competition platform, and an acknowledged master player. It was Donald’s first year at Fort San, and there was plenty of excitement about this great piper before he arrived. When he came around to meet the classes that year, we were all charmed by this gentle, approachable, and grandfatherly man. He made a point of “connecting” with each student he met. To me he said something like, “We’re bound to be good friends—I’m part MacDonald too.”

That year, we were sent to Donald in

Donald MacLeod competing at the Dingwall Highland Games, 1948. The judge in the center is Angus MacPherson, MBE. Note the column of steam coming from a train in Dingwall Station.



MACLEOD FAMILY PHOTO

small groups to learn piobaireachd. We left our regular classes, and made our way to an old one-room schoolhouse, where Donald waited for us. One of the first things we did was learn to write and play basic piobaireachd movements. Donald dictated, and we wrote. I still use those directions to start players on the movements, and to reinforce how they are to be executed.

Donald's favourite tunes for beginners in those days were "Duncan MacRae of Kintail's Lament" and "The Old Sword." That summer, I heard the first good piobaireachd of my life, also from Donald. He played "The Desperate Battle."

Over many summers, Donald returned to schools in Canada and the USA, and each year we had new piobaireachd, light music, history, and inspiration. Donald MacLeod was both demanding and gentle. He appreciated wit, and had plenty to dish out when needed. When I was about 19, Donald suggested that if I was interested, I should come to Scotland for lessons. I would follow other pipers from the region who had also gone to Scotland: Garth Neel from Dauphin, Manitoba (won the Marches at Inverness); Kelly Todd and Alan Walters from Calgary—both prize winners in Scotland.

After completing a university degree, I left for Scotland, where in 1978 and 1981 I had the benefit of weekly lessons with Donald. In 1978, Donald was still the owner of Grainger & Campbell. Each Tuesday, I made my way to the shop on Argyle Street, where I sat on "The Stool of Repentance" (as he referred to it) under the stairs, had lessons, and drank in every sight, sound and name in the shop. Donald would stand behind the

counter, or work at the table behind, and singing and direct me through tunes. On occasion, I would go to his house, where he would make tapes for me to use as reference.

Through the doors of the shop came piping greats, and the not-so-greats. They were all received with a warm smile, a hand shake, perhaps a smattering of Gaelic, and many stayed long enough to get a cup of coffee and have a chat. One of Donald's favourite visitors was Roddy MacDonald

of South Uist. They would chat and banter, talk about the tune I was learning, and remember who played what and how.

Each evening when I was back in Paisley, I would write down the stories I heard, the bits of history, and reflections on the characters who came in the door. It was an experience that made me a better piper, and a better person. I met many fine people in that shop, and had a chance to get to know a generation of great pipers, many

**Right, Donald MacLeod is seen tuning up at the Argyllshire Gathering in 1954, wearing the uniform of the Seaforth Highlanders. Is that Donald MacPherson in the background? Below, Iain MacDonald, seated fifth from the left with the Saskatchewan Summer School of the Arts Class of '68. Donald MacLeod is seated, far right.**



MACLEOD FAMILY PHOTO

who are now gone.

By 1981, Donald had been ill, and had sold Grainger & Campbell to Sir Patrick Grant and Robert Wallace. That year, I visited Donald at his home each week. I would arrive in the morning, to be greeted by Donald and Mrs. MacLeod, and we usually started with a cup of coffee “just to take the chill off your fingers.” We would go upstairs to a spare bedroom, which was set up as a music room, and Donald would lead me through the tunes, and later put them on tape. His technique was to teach three or four tunes, spend a couple of weeks working on them, and then have a session making a tape from his master copies. Donald was a strong believer in the value of recordings, and he encouraged their use for teaching and learning.

He had two cassette recorders, and he would put the master in one, the blank cassette in the other, and then we would follow in the book. From time to time, he would stop the master to add comments or possible variations to the tune. “I’ve also heard it this way...” and then he would sing or play the alternative, and then restart the master. My tapes also feature the sound of Donald rolling his small brown cigarettes in the background!

Following the lesson, I often had a sandwich and coffee with the MacLeods, and the talk covered many subjects. Piping and piobaireachd were the primary themes, but both Donald and Mrs. MacLeod were extremely interested in the world around, and the talk covered everything from local Glasgow events to world politics. By the time I left Scotland in late 1981, I had been through more than 150 piobaireachd with Donald, and many pieces of light music.

What always amazed me about this experience, is that I was so incredibly lucky to have that kind of tuition. During my stay in Scotland, I met many players far better than me who would have loved to have lessons from Donald MacLeod. I believe that Donald’s main interest at that time

**A publicity shot taken during the War for an article on the Army School of Piping. Teaching is P/M Willie Ross, and the students are P/M Donald MacLeod, Seaforth Highlanders and P/M William MacLeod, Cameron Highlanders of Canada. Apparently there was another photo taken, in which Willie Ross pointed to a D and Donald fingered a High G as a joke. Willie was none too pleased to find that photo was also printed.**



MACLEOD FAMILY PHOTO

was in perpetuating the music, and he taught people who would pass on what they had learned. Many of the champion players that he taught—Andrew Wright, Iain Morrison, John Wilson, Angus J. MacLellan—have been notable teachers in their careers. He often stated that the only recompense he would take for the lessons, is that I teach others what I had learned, to the best of my ability. For the record, I continue to keep up my end of the deal.

I continue also to be guided, influenced and inspired by his example, his teaching and his philosophies—as he saw them at that time. “Life can be like piobaireachd,” he would say. “To have a good one, balance is essential.”

#### **JOURNAL ENTRIES**

##### **December 1977**

Lessons with Donald are going well. I am onto two new piobaireachd, and we

have gone over some old ones, and a load of light music. He is being very critical and very thorough, and it’s really helping me.

##### **March 1978**

Donald told a story told about how he was competing in the Clasp one year, and there was one of the tunes on the list that he didn’t play. He had it pinned to the wall in Grainger & Campbell and sang it daily, but hadn’t got around to playing it. When he got to the boards, that was the tune they asked to hear, and he started in, expecting to break down on each successive line. He didn’t though, and in fact he won the event, with a tune he’d never played on the pipes before.

##### **March 1978**

When an old “island” friend of Donald’s came into the shop the other day, they were talking about what it was like to be a boy on the islands in that era. The only entertainment they had was what they

did—singing, piping, fiddling and dancing. It was many years until the islands got “wireless” after the mainland, and even when they did Donald and the other young pipers only ever listened to the broadcasts of Pipe Major Willie Ross.

#### April 1978

Iain MacPherson came into Graingers at noon, and he and Donald got to talking about Willie Ross and John MacDonald of Inverness. Donald started going to John when he was about 11—that was when the Piobaireachd Society sent MacDonald as their own travelling tutor. He called Donald “MacLeod” then, and for the whole 25 years that Donald went to him, he only ever called him “MacLeod”.

Willie Ross toured the Highlands as a tutor for the Piobaireachd Society, and during his second year he got six-year-old Donald MacLeod from Stornoway. Donald’s father, who was himself a very good piper, used to say to Willie, “It’s no use teaching him piobaireachd movements, because he’ll never be able to play them anyway.” It used to make the young Donald so furious he’d go away for hours hammering out movements on the chanter. He thinks that was exactly what his father had hoped for!

#### July 1978

South Uist Games—The weather varied between sunshine/warmth, and cold/rain. I played piobaireachd first and got “Struan Robertson’s Salute”. Managed a pretty good tune, pipes sweet, but flat-tish F. I placed 5th of 15 pipers, so I was quite pleased. Got £3 for my effort.

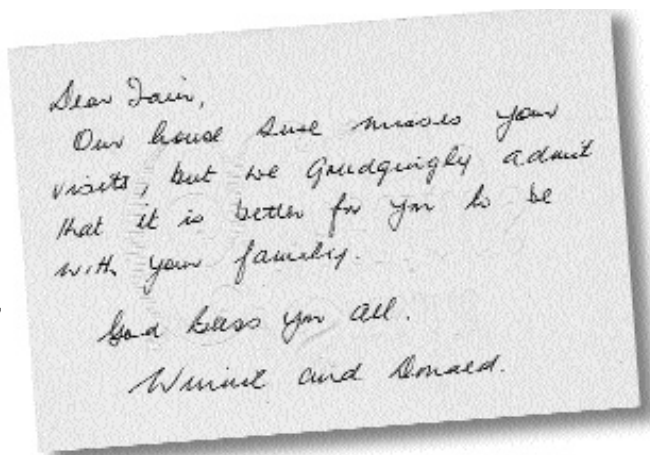
#### September 1978

I was in to see Donald, and he tells me that Kelly Todd got a prize in the strathspey and reel at Inverness! John McDougall won the Clasp, 18 years after winning the Medal. Angus MacDonald won the Former Winners’ MSR. Angus has had a very successful year.

#### February 1981

Donald told a story about Angus MacPherson and Seton Gordon, and their inability to hear well in later years. At the Lonach Gathering one year, it rained hard all day, and they pulled a little Austin mini in front of the platform for the two judges to sit in. Donald came up to play the strathspey and reel, and Angus rolled down the window and said, “What are your tunes?” Donald said “Cameronian Rant and Pretty

**December, 1981.**  
Donald’s Christmas card, like his teaching, was encouraging and thoughtful. He considered teaching a shared and enjoyable experience.



Marion” and Angus rolled the window up and Donald went to play. He played two-parted tunes four times each...and won!

#### March 1981

Willie Ross called the Kilberry Collection the “Kill Piobaireachd Book”, and he also referred to it as “that damn green thing”. The original cover was green.

#### May 1981

Last week Donald was talking about competitions—the winning and losing of them, and how it affects people as musicians and as individuals. He is always one to under rate his own ability, and he said that day a number of things about people in general that seem to be very true. He talked a bit about how “everyone loves a winner”. People used to tell him what a great performance he’d given when he was very unhappy with it. To be really successful, a person must be his/her worst critic, and even very good performances should be looked at critically, with a view to improvement.

#### August 1981

Cowal Games—The park outside the stadium was elbow to elbow with pipers, drummers, dancers and people watching. Bands tuning up, marching all over and people lying on the grass, drinking beer and taking in the hot sun. In short, a glorious occasion!

#### September 1981

Pitlochry Games—Blew pipes a long time before playing. The band (Babcock-Renfrew) was a shambles all afternoon, but came out sounding good on the field! Played the “51st at Beaumont Hamel” set, and made a good job of it. The result was: 1) Shotts, 2) Babcock-Renfrew, 3) Polkemet, 4) Lothian & Borders, 5) Wallaceston

and 6) Strathclyde Police. In the massed band on the way out, many pipers and drummers changed instruments for the march out, the result being that it sounded awful. The attack was terrible, and you could hardly tell what tune was being played. It was pretty funny.

#### October 1981

Wednesday I spent four hours at Donald’s having a chat, lunch, and saying goodbye. I was very down-hearted to have to say goodbye, and I think he will miss me too, which makes it a little worse. I suppose he is used to the coming and going more than I am. ■

*Iain MacDonald teaches piobaireachd to students in Saskatchewan, and at summer schools in Western Canada. He played for a number of years with SFU, and is the Pipe Major of the City of Regina Pipe Band.*

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