

Willie Donaldson (1944- )

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Brought up in Fraserburgh Aberdeenshire, and surrounding fisher villages full of traditional music. Bowled over by the Thousand Pipers March in Edinburgh in 1952, giving a vision of musical power; I wanted not just to be able to play this wonderful stuff but to understand its secret.

Given basic instruction age twelve by visiting piper. When he left town, chanter gathered dust throughout teens. Took it up again, stirred by interest in piobaireachd heard by chance on radio. Desire to find out about this music led to OTC at university when friend told me he knew a fellow student who knew about this it. OTC at Aberdeen was full of good young pipers, an extraordinary concentration of talent. In my time it included Jack Taylor, Bill Wotherspoon, W. R. Fraser, Ian Duncan; the Piobaireachd Society treasurer Walter Gray was in it; the folksinger Andy Hunter (later President of the Lowland and Border Pipers Society) was pipe-major when I came, and Alan MacDonald arrived just as I was leaving.

Most of these guys studied with the Bobs of Balmoral, especially Bob Brown (Bob Nicol had been ill and out of the public eye for some years at that point), and I used to go out to Garbhallsheil with them in a succession of beat-up old cars and sit in on lessons. After a while I began to wonder about the mysterious Bob Nicol, and went to him, solo, for eight years. A wonderful man. Got ninety-nine tunes from him. Used to go up in the bus to Ballater and walk to Blacksmith's Cottages on the edge of the Birkhall estate. He didn't have a phone in the early days and you had to arrange lessons through the local police. You would ring them up and say 'Could I come and see Mr. Nicol on such and such a day'? And a day or two later they would say 'aye, you're to come at such and such a time', and off you'd go in the bus.

In those days you could wander freely about the stacks at the University library, and they had a good deal of the older pipe music, I seem to remember Angus MacKay and Uilleam Ross, but I couldn't find Thomason's *Ceol Mor*, a legendary affair--Bob Nicol frequently spoke of his own copy being stolen out of the pipers' room at Balmoral. This seemed odd because given Thomason's Speyside connections, Local Collections should have had one. The search intrigued one of the librarians, even, from a bibliographical point of view (you know the peculiar publication history of the collection) and we spent a whole afternoon but we couldn't track it.

Eventually I became pipe-sergeant and then pipe-major of the OTC. I used to go round to the Unit every lunchtime to play. They had this huge nissan-type garage with a concrete floor and you got a terrific ring off it. At that time I was playing a set of borrowed MacDougall drones and Ian Duncan's second-best Hardie chanter, reeds by Nicol; I forget who did the drone reeds, probably D.R. McLennan. Anyway one day an old man approached me, lived in the neighbourhood, and said: 'I listen to you every day. You play too fast, laddie, but you'd better have this.' 'This' was a copy of Angus MacKay's light music collection the *Piper's Assistant*. I thought, gosh, I don't know what I'm going to do or where I'll go after my student days are over, so this had better be deposited somewhere safe. So I donated it to the University Library with written instructions about what it was, its importance, the fact that it was a first edition (I think