

The life of John MacDonald

This is an outline of the life and career of the famous John MacDonald of Inverness. It concentrates on personal and professional aspects rather than his music. For his competitive career and his position in relation to piping politics, see especially the books by Bridget MacKenzie and William Donaldson, and for more on the Army classes in piping see the presentations by Diana Henderson at the Piobaireachd Society Conference. Many thanks to Jeannie Campbell and Keith Sanger for help with this work.

John MacDonald was born in 1865, at Glentruim, near Kingussie, where his father, Alexander, was piper to MacPherson of Glen Truim. He was the third of nine, or perhaps ten, children. Little is known of his early life apart from traditions that he learned piping at first from his father and from his uncle, William. State schooling became general in Scotland from 1872, and John's training must have been good to judge from his clerical skill and power of expression in his correspondence of adult years. We hear little of his piping career until 1890, when he won the Gold Medal for piobaireachd at Inverness – playing *The King's Taxes* as he himself later recalled. By that time he was living at Glentromie, also near Kingussie, as gamekeeper and piper. Aged 25, he had not married, and his sister Jane, aged 18, was there too. We might conjecture that she was keeping house for him – a pattern that was to recur much later in his life. In 1897, it is said, he won the 'other' Gold Medal, at Oban.



He held positions on several country estates, then in 1899 he joined the armed forces, that is the 1st Volunteer Battalion, Cameron Highlanders, and was appointed Pipe Serjeant (Pipe Major) from the very beginning. His duties would have involved attending an annual camp, but presumably also organising the Battalion Pipe Band and perhaps overseeing the training of pipers at centres over a wider area than Inverness. In 1908 the Volunteers were reorganised into the Territorial Force and the 1st V.B. became the 4th Battalion Cameron Highlanders. John's Service Record dates from that moment, but when it came to computing his service for the Territorial Force Efficiency Medal, which he gained in 1911, it was taken from his earlier joining date in 1899. All this would be strictly part-time soldiering, on very limited pay, and if

John had ceased by this time to be a full-time gamekeeper, we must assume that he had found some other civilian occupation. We do know that by 1901 he was living in the town of Inverness, and we know that at least in 1910 he worked for a time as a commercial traveller in wine and spirits. We also know from comments in later life that he disliked town life and would always have preferred the country.

From about this time there are some valuable piping documents, preserved by John Shone. They consist of 12 tunes (*piobaireachd*), one written by hand, the others cut from printed books. Each is neatly pasted into a separate cardboard folder. The labels on the folders look like John's writing and there are annotations on some of the scores. These interesting papers could well tell us more about John's music.

He was now developing a more solid career in piping. The *Piobaireachd* Society came into being in 1903, and within a few years it had started to pay instructors to teach *ceòl mór* in various parts of Scotland. The first classes were in 1907, and by 1908 if not before, John MacDonald was among the instructors, teaching in Inverness, and soon after, in South Uist. The decisive change came however in 1910. The Society succeeded in negotiating with the Army to set up a formal course as a qualification for future Pipe-Majors. John was appointed as the Instructor on a permanent basis, paid partly and indirectly by the Society itself. The first such course began in October 1910. It ran for three months, ending in January 1911, and was followed almost immediately by the second course.

The courses were attended by soldiers sent by different Scottish Regiments. They took place at the Cameron Barracks, Inverness, where the soldiers were housed for the purpose. Only the examinations at the end of each course were held elsewhere, in Edinburgh. We have no accounts of these courses by the soldiers themselves but we do learn that the routine was daily tuition in the mornings, in one-hour lessons, with time in the afternoons set aside for practice. Six pipers took the first course, four pipers the second, and their names and units are all on record. Two pipers passed from each course, and the others were recorded with partial passes, the tests being subdivided into practical performance, theory of written music and the principles of organising a pipe band. The tests were set and marked by the *Piobaireachd* Society, and the standard was high, as we can judge from three sets of answer papers which have been preserved, and from some reports and letters that John MacDonald wrote himself. Another revealing record preserved by John Shone is a manuscript evidently written during the progress of the second of these two courses. It contains ten tunes (*piobaireachd*), unsigned, but dated, eight of them written in Inverness in the months of January-March 1911, two more in Plymouth in January 1912. This manuscript may have been written by a piper who attended the second course, perhaps Corporal James Dunbar, of the 2nd Royal Scots, who did indeed serve in Plymouth in 1912. The tunes are a well-selected group of relatively simple pieces, appropriate for a piper who was essentially a beginner in *piobaireachd*, and the meticulous notation is another tribute to the thoroughness of John MacDonald's teaching.

The courses continued under John MacDonald, extended from three months to six. The four pipers who had failed to pass the first course outright were allowed to take the third course and three of them passed successfully. It was noted that two of those four had actually been quite experienced players before they started, one having been a boy at what later became The Royal Caledonian Schools in London, the other a

member of a noted piping family in South Uist, whom John had taught earlier during his visits there. No doubt there was intense competition to be accepted on these courses. The reputation of John MacDonald would ensure that, and even more, the fact that passing the course was a necessary condition for promotion to Pipe-Sergeant.

During this pre-war period another event occurred which centred around John MacDonald's teaching. It concerned the writing and playing of characteristic piobaireachd movements like the taorluath and crunluath. In modern times this has been dubbed the question of the 'redundant A' but to call it that is simply to prejudge the issue in favour of the settlement that was finally reached. No piper needs to be reminded of the details, but it seems that as early as 1909 attempts were being made to define the 'correct' way of writing these movements. Then in 1913 a document was drafted by J. P. Grant of Rothiemurchus, and circulated to be signed as 'correct' by Sandy Cameron, John MacDonald and John MacDougall Gillies. Grant's covering letter to MacDonald is couched in terms of enquiry, along the lines that if the professionals all agree that the controversial note A should not be played, that will settle the matter, but if they are not unanimous the matter will have to be left open. That is a reading of the documents at face value, but whether the documents should be read at face value is another question, as anyone with experience of the delicate matter of ascertaining traditional beliefs will know. The actual result, on paper, was that the three pipers did sign the document, and that the new notation quickly became universal in the printed literature, including all subsequent publications of the Piobaireachd Society. Only a few days before signing, John MacDonald was writing to Grant, saying that in the playing of the leumluath, he still preferred to hear the A, but in public he never said anything about the issue as far as we know.

The Army classes continued regularly until the First World War. Indeed arrangements for the next class were still being made as late as 1st August 1914, but war was declared on the 4th and everything must have come to a halt. At this point John was just over 49 years old. He was called up but evidently taken ill while actually on the way south, and had to be invalided out. He was discharged in October of the same year.

Later, in 1915, John went into civilian employment with George Younger and Son, Brewers, as a travelling salesman. Perhaps, as hinted above, he was going back to a career he had already been in before he took on the Army course. It seems likely that the job gave him travel and flexible time conditions, enabling him to continue as a piping teacher on a private basis. It appears that the owner of the firm was on familiar terms with J. P. Grant, so there may have been 'wheels within wheels'.

In 1917, at the rather late age of 51, John married for the first time, and shortly after that, he and his wife Christina moved house, to No 5 Perceval Road. But Christina only lived for two years. He married again in 1923 and he and his new wife Helen were together first at No 5, then next door at No. 3 Perceval Road, the house which John bought and where he lived for the rest of his life. But Helen died too, in 1932, and there were no children.

We can guess that the 1920's were a period of modest prosperity and relative contentment, although we have nothing of his personal life to go on – no letters and no family recollections that have been preserved. It was still a period of active professional piping, winning clasps at Inverness in 1924, 1927, 1929 – and two more

to follow in 1933 and 1934. By the mid-thirties he had unchallenged celebrity status, with the MBE and a position of Honorary Piper to the King. The view of him in leading amateur circles was summed up by Archibald Campbell, '[his] position as a link with the famous pipers of the past is now unique'.

By this time also, the Piobaireachd Society was making further efforts to secure John's services on a paid professional basis. There was talk of finding him a country home to which he could retire in the intervals between teaching trips, and also, more practicably, of arranging a time-share with his employers, e.g. three months per year full-time with the Society. Part of the motivation for this was the view that John should be enabled to concentrate his efforts where it was felt they were most needed – handing on his traditional knowledge to the next generation of professional pipers. But amateur pupils, some of them excellent players themselves, may always have been important to him, not least as a source of income.

When the present writer joined the Piobaireachd Society in 1972, many of the older members had lively memories of visiting 'old John' at his house for lessons. One of those who left some record was Frank Richardson, who compiled a diary which is still preserved. The diary and a book which he co-authored much later contain a good deal of technical detail and descriptions of playing style, but they also include one or two personal impressions. Frank is precise about some dates, saying that he went fairly continuously in 1933-4, then continued with some breaks due to illness and military service until 1946. From the earliest years he recalls that a sister of John's, Mrs Anderson, lived in and kept house for him, and we now know that this was Margaret, who had been born about 1876, and had once been married to a man named John Anderson. But she died in 1938, and among the few truly personal items we have from John's life are letters to Seton Gordon and to Archibald Campbell, Kilberry, thanking them for letters of sympathy. 'I shall miss her cheerie, kind, and encouraging companionship, very much indeed, but one must carry on, with the courage and fortitude she maintained to the end...'

During the war years, John's health became poor. He took final retirement from Youngers in 1947, but it is unlikely that the pressure of would-be pupils slackened off. There are tales of pipers going to see him and playing to him even when he was bedridden. We also have one relic of his continued interest in keeping up with piobaireachd – a small collection of sheets of manuscript music, with tunes which would probably have been new to him, some copied from the *Kilberry Book of Ceol Mor* which was first published in 1948. These too have been preserved by John Shone. (It is perhaps worth mentioning that in these tunes MacDonald follows the notation as well as the style of the Kilberry Book, but this and the other manuscripts mentioned here all need closer study).

John MacDonald died on 6th June 1953.

There are no footnotes here, but full references will be found in the companion documents also published on the Piobaireachd Society website.