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The Bagpipes in the Sutherland Family
A few Early Recollections

It is hard for many adults to remember many of their early auditory sensations. My earliest recollection of the bagpipes is very hazy. I cannot recall having heard them at Morness, when I was a little child. When I was taken from Morness to Ardachu by our cousin, Isie, I must have heard the pipes often, because Uncle Neil had a set, and so must have played them frequently. I think that I can recall Uncle Neil's playing the pipes at Craighton about the time that the stone barn and some of the other buildings were being erected, or at the time the house was being built. My picture of him is one in which I see him marching with the pipes back and forth close to the barn in front of the stable door. If that early impression is true, the part of the barn facing south, consisting of the dipper, store-house, and chicken-house, had not then been built. Instead there was an open space, rough and green.

Years passed -- long years to childhood, because they had so much crowded into them -- and then memories became more definite. The Murrays across the meadow had pipes. There were Eric and George Murray. Often across the meadow and over the hills must have pierced the strident notes of the pipes. We made and played chanters at an early age. How did we make them? I do not know where we got the idea, whether by accident or by observation, but we discovered that we could bore a hole into a piece of wood by means of a red-hot iron or wire. This wire we cut about eighteen inches in length, put a curve at one end to make the handling of it easier, and pointed the tip to make more rapid progress in the boring, although this often had the tendency to cause the wire to deflect and burst with a sizzle and a puff of smoke through the side of the wood being bored. *Several = 3*

We often got severe scoldings at those boring-events. For when the red-hot wire was applied to the wood and pressed into it, a steady stream of smoke issued into the air, filling the room with a smell that was a delight to our noses but a source of agony to our elders. So our operations were often carried on under adverse conditions, although on the whole the older folk were tolerant, for we made chanters by the dozen for many years.

Even yet -- after thirty years -- there is an element of fascination about boring a hole with a red-hot wire, especially when the second generation looks on in silent wonder -- Neil (8), Marilyn (6), and Bobby (4½). For example, we can never tell where the hole is to appear -- whether at the end or at the side. Almost always the red-hot wire, especially if sharp and pressed rather too hard, will follow

the line of least resistance -- that is, along the grain. So that often it is possible to predict fairly accurately where the sizzling borer will appear. But often it is not possible to make such predictions, and too often the wandering wire will burst out at the side. The boring is rather a slow job. In the case of fir, when a sharp wire is used with a red-hot point, each application of the wire may advance the bore as much as an inch. But the speed of progress will depend on the size of the wire, the sharpness of the point, the heat maintained, and the hardness of the wood. Such was the philosophy which our young minds worked out in the smoky atmosphere of chanter-boring. A favorite piece to bore was a slender branch, straight and of the desired length, about fifteen inches. The borers naturally followed the line of least resistance -- the pith -- and the appearance of the borer in the center of the other end of the wood afforded no surprise. Where the wood has no such central pith, the appearance of the wire at or near the center of the other end of the stick affords much satisfaction. But we cannot be too sure of the success of the bore in the latter type of wood until we look through the bore to see how straight it is. It may be crooked, it may follow a wandering path, and accidentally, as it were, emerge in the center at the other end. But such bores are the exceptional cases, not the rule.

Having succeeded in boring a hole through the wood, then came the whittling, or, in Gaelic, "snagerach," (the spelling is not correct), which was done with a sharp knife, which in our earlier days was not a real pocket-knife, but an ordinary table knife, trimmed short, the handle shortened, the blade cut off about half-way, and then ground narrow. When the metal happened to be good steel, we got a keen edge. With this instrument, which we called a "cuddy," we soon sliced and peeled and cross-cutted a chanter out of the piece of wood with the bore. Additional scrapping, rubbing, and even sand-papering, soon produced an instrument which gladdened our boyish hearts.

Probably no two chanters ever had the same sound; each had, and still has, its own individuality. To be sure, the nature of the wood, its length and thickness, always play an important part, in fact explain the whole difference, in thus producing an endless variety of chanter-tones. After the snagerach came the very important job of boring the finger-holes in the chanter. There are eight of these holes -- one back-hole for the thumb of the hand placed on the upper part of the chanter, and seven other holes directly opposite that hole and placed at the proper place and at appropriate distances. The form of the finished chanter is graceful, as most musical instruments are graceful. In this rough diagram, the top has been removed:

chosen. These are then rounded by the plane on the old bench, are brought into the house, and then the boring begins.

For many years we played a variety of home-made chanters before we tried our hand at making bagpipes. I believe that our first attempt was to fix a bag to a practising chanter. We did that several times. To add a drone or two was the next natural step. In our boyish imagination, this was another step toward the ideal. But the set that is outstanding is one made by Donald. He had a practising chanter which one night he started to enlarge. Boring away with a hot iron, he increased the hole considerably and also enlarged the finger-holes. After some experience, the chanter was found to be relatively true in tone. It sounded like a real chanter, but with a smaller tone, since this instrument was much smaller than the full-size bagpipe chanter. We did not quite realize the significance of this achievement, until we tried making other chanters. These later attempts were not quite as successful. The first, little chanter with a cracked bottom, if I remember right, held the premier place in our estimation for a long time. Eventually we obtained a large bit especially adapted for boring pipe chanters, but even with this chanter-bit we never turned out another instrument that compared favorably with the small chanter.

At the time we got this new large chanter-bit, we naturally thought that the matter of making a real chanter was well within our grasp. But that proved to be a mistaken notion, as our subsequent attempts were not pronounced successes.

Donald's little bagpipe set deserves special mention. He made a bag out of a sheep-skin. This he deftly cut out and sewed by hand, making the necessary holes for the drones, chanter, and mouth-piece. Small drones were made to fit the chanter. This little set sounded remarkably well. George Murray, Aultimoult, visited one evening. I can still see him there in the old kitchen. The old folk were there. Father sat in his large wooden chair, over which was a well-seasoned sheep-skin.

"Man, you made a fine job of them," George said with a broad smile. "That chanter sounds well. I can't understand how you ever got it to sound true. It's like a real one."

But the little bag was leaky. So the little pipes were notoriously hard to blow. George tried them. "Man, they're too hard to blow." He finished a tune breathlessly. "You mustn't use that bag too often, or you'll spoil your breath." Donald did affect his wind with that old set; for I remember how easily he seemed to run out of breath when we ran together.

What became of that old set? If any set ever earned a place in a museum, surely that set did. It was discarded when more approved instruments appeared on the scene.

The time came when Donald went to the ~~Leing~~ ^{muir} Public School. He stayed at Uncle Donald's farm at Pitfure. One day he arrived at Craighton with an old set which he got from a little old man -- Willie MacNeil -- a nomad. Old MacNeil must have had his virtues, for he must have loved to play the pipes. Many of the old tunes must have touched the better part of his rough inner nature. Donald must have felt a strange elation when he first realized that he possessed a real ebony set, even granting that they were old. We were deeply interested in this old set when he brought them home. We played them many a time.

One day George Murray came over. On seeing the pipes, he

gave a hearty shout: "What, old MacNeil's set? Well, what do you know about that?" Or words to that effect. And as he spoke, his eyes feasted on the old set, for his mind could see many unusual experiences lying back of the set played by MacNeil on his continuous peregrinations.

George played the pipes not so badly, as he belonged to a pipe-band, if I recollect properly; and the old set seemed to peal out a hidden spirit which longed to move over the lonely hills and meadows.

There was another occasion when Donald and I thought that we would make a set comparable to the best sets there were. I well remember how we climbed up through the woods on Dalmore Rock, visited the granite quarry, and found straight pieces of branches of fir or pine. We took several pieces home. Later we bored away with the red-hot wires, and made several successful drills through the larger pieces, but when we came to fashion the drones, the hole proved tortuous, for we cut into it; and so the idea of a first-class set seemed to have vanished.

At a time when Donald and I were very small, our brother, Neil, obtained a set from Uncle Neil, Ardachu. This set he played for several years. I seem to have a few memories of that set. On New Year's Day, Neil used to be up and out with the pipes at an early hour -- sometimes at four o'clock in the morning. Donald and I played on that old set. Neil used to play for some time, and then we would stand around waiting for our turn to have a blow on them. He used to march with them at the end of the house. I have pleasant memories of his playing them there on clear frosty evenings, just before darkness came on. The air was clear, and the sound of the pipes could be heard for miles around.

One of our boyish antics was to stand on a spade and jump as long as possible. With a little practice we used to go some distance along the road. I recall Neil's playing the pipes as I hopped on the spade, during which he laughed loudly to throw me off, without letting the drones die out.

Another incident was that of the peat-cutting time at Aultimoult. That was a big day, as many "tusks" were kept going, striving was common, and the young folk met and had a social time. Around the house, especially at the back, the pipers would march, especially Eric Murray and Neil, both of whom were fast friends. I can still see Neil moving back and forth, but we could tell it was he more readily from his playing, for he had a style of play essentially his own.

When Neil left Craigton for America, he carried the pipes with him. After landing in New York, he must have played the pipes in his hotel, for he later wrote home and said that the New Yorkers were interested. Reading his letter, we visualized him marching through the streets of New York with every citizen interested. How limited is the imagination of youth. Away to the west, into far off Montana, he carried them. He must have played them often as he herded the sheep on the Montana prairies. There is a possibility that this old set went through the Battle of Waterloo.

When Donald came to Montana, he got the old set from

While the holes were being bored -- and we placed them in the wood to conform to the size of our small hands -- that is, as we grew older the chanter grew bigger, and the holes were automatically placed farther apart -- while the holes were being bored, we located the proper places for them by measuring the distances between the fingers. The hot iron left a rather charred and brownish area around the holes, but some additional sand-papering wore the wood down, so that the holes stood out clearly. Experience soon taught us how to whittle the chanter, but seeing the fine ebony chanters of our neighbors, the Murrays, helped us in gaining a more complete picture of the mature instrument. The thinner the chanter, the thinner the tone; and the sonorous element would be decreased if the instrument was either too thin or too thick. A chanter of excessive thickness yielded only a dull, lifeless tone.

The nature of the wood made a distinct difference, for hard woods have more resonance; the soft woods gave softer tones; but use and a steady drying process heightened the tone of the softer woods, somewhat. A good chanter, we thought, had a lively but rich tone.

And to sentimentalize: How many forms these chanters took. What shapes. What strange sounds. How many tunes. What delightful childish joys. Where are these chanters now. Where are those sounds, those ideas, those feelings. The chanters have gone to dust. One by one, they came into existence, were used, fondled, gave satisfaction, and then were discarded or lost, - to be slowly consumed back into the dust. Childhood memories -- may they pass on forever. The old chanters are dust; perhaps after thirty years some old hard-wood pieces are lying quietly in an undisturbed spot. How many the movements since then of the fingers that once ran over them.

I have no clear recollection of any particular chanter, but I do have a definite image of a generalized chanter. A childish thing with somewhat irregular holes, a rough spot here and there, but all the same having the capacity to make satisfying sounds.

As a rule we seemed to have made chanters more often during the winter, because the chilly outside world kept us more inside, especially at night, and the long nights soon passed to the tune of the chanter. Sometimes in the day-time, in winter, the day is short. Ben Clebric and the hills all around are under a white coat of snow. The sky is filled with clouds, snow banks rising in voluminous formations. Chilly winds blow at times, but the sun comes through in strong splashes at times; the snow is melting off the slate and sometimes it comes down in masses which almost catch us below. These masses make a characteristic sound as they slide down the zinc on the byre or barn. At the eaves water drips on to the slushy ground below. The snow all around is melting, more heather is coming through, the river is rising, and the dark patches among the white snow on the meadow show that the river is rising, and there will be a lake two miles long and about half a mile wide. The stream by the house is singing, the cows can be heard, the chickens make a varied cackle, the snow-birds are merrier than usual after the cold spell. It is dinner time -- meat, potatoes, soup, bread, butter, and tea. A turn is taken on the sheep -- back home -- in the work-shop over the stable are pieces of wood, one or two of which are

Neil, and continued to play them. While Donald was in Peru he made the drones of a set and used an old chanter. I now have this set at Oak Grove, Oregon. Donald sent them to me in 1934. I had not possessed a set before then, so it was a bit of a thrill to renew the old associations after about a quarter of a century. The chanter on this set was made by Glen. It has been in use for many years, as the holes are worn down well.

The desire to play the pipes possessed us at an early age. That was no doubt due to the fact that we heard the pipes being played all about us from the beginning. The Murrays played them across the meadow; while down in Rogart there were several pipers. Thus, from the making and playing of our own small home-made sets, we progressed to the larger sets. Donald had another set, mounted in silver and ivory, which he played at the Highland Games, taking many prizes. He took this set out to Peru.

When I spent the summer with Donald at the Flat Creek Ranch, owned by an old man named Carmichael, he and I spent some time playing the pipes. On the day I arrived, Donald showed me a set he had made for the sheep foreman, an Alex *Muir*. He had made a fine job of this set, having made use of better tools. He had thus two sets. His played much better than he did years ago, when as a young fellow, he competed at the Highland Games. His technique was now much refined. When I went out to the woods to herd a bunch of sheep, Donald appeared on the scene one hot Sunday carrying the pipes. We played them in a canyon, on the bank of a small stream, with a high hill in front of us. Every Sunday from there on, Donald came up, and invariably we had a few tunes on the pipes. He went to much trouble copying down tunes for me. One of these tunes was the "Glengarry Highlanders" in its modern style. He also copied some other tunes, including one given him by a John Renwick. Much of the incidents mentioned here I have touched upon in correspondence.

It was in the summer of 1935 that I spent the summer in Montana with Donald. During the summer of 1936 I remained at home, and spent most of the time writing, and doing various other things. But during all this time the bagpipes have been much in the foreground. I made the acquaintance of the Vancouver Police Pipe Band which played at the Rose Festival this summer. They came from Canada along with a section of the Mounted Police. I have also associated with the Canadian Legion Pipe Band at Portland, most of the members of which are Scottish. In addition, I made the acquaintance of the pipers of the Clan MacClay. I have been playing the pipes a good deal with these pipers. I got acquainted with a William Purvis, whom I have mentioned frequently in my correspondence with Donald. From Purvis I hope to gain a finer insight into playing, and especially to get a grasp of the pibrochs.

While I may go into more details later, I wonder at this time what shall be the nature of the recollections of our children -- Neil, Merilyn, and Robert. Shall they cultivate the desire to play the pipes, will they be able to appreciate this music; or will they merely regard it as an old world left-over? A few minutes ago, there was in my room here on

Lee Avenue, Oak Grove, a crowd of little folk -- the children of two families, Wagenknecht and Briggs -- and along with them came Neil, Merrie, and Bobby. I had been playing the pipes for a few minutes, when they appeared on the scene. I gave all that wanted to do so a chance to blow at the pipes. They blew and giggled. Will they recall these days in the long years to come? Let me place myself in the year 1970, say. What then? If a wish may come true, Neil will be able to play then as few men in the West will, and he may have a much deeper grasp of the old traditions than I now have. Many things may work in ways far beyond our imaginations at this moment, but some traditions should keep going right on to a finer and more comprehensive fruition.