

# Piping in South Uist and Benbecula

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**FROM 21 to 27 November, 2006, J Decker Forrest and Joshua Dickson — both members of staff active in Scottish music and research at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama — toured South Uist and Benbecula in pursuit of sources both new and familiar. It was a chance to catch up with long-time colleagues in the chronicling of change and tradition in the area (whether to revisit past lines of enquiry or to follow new ones) and to search for sources of seanchas — oral history, personal reminiscence, the inside scoop — heretofore overlooked.**

This was not the first trip to Uist for either Josh or Decker: Josh spent much time there researching his doctorate in Scottish ethnology, culminating in the book *When Piping Was Strong* (2006); Decker began researching piping in Uist several years ago and has close family connections to the area.

They arrived in Uist with a number of research objectives for the week. Decker was, in the main, interested in the material culture associated with piping in Uist and Benbecula, such as the indigenous manufacture of practice chanters and reeds for both chanter and drone. Josh was mainly focused on biographical and performance information relating to Lachlan Bàn MacCormick (1859-1952), whose life spanned a great deal of change in the Hebridean tradition. Both were also interested in light music performance style and surviving Gaelic nomenclature for tunes, technical words and instrument materials. In addition, Decker was keen to investigate the use of the *truimpe*, or jew's harp, in Uist and Benbecula.

What follows is a day-by-day account of their work and travels during the week in question. The notes on which it is based were composed at the end of each day as a way of allowing them to reflect on the day's work, consider the significance or otherwise of this or that, and generally improve recall of interviews that may or may not have been voice-recorded. This is considered an essential plank of ethnographic or journalistic research of any sort. The authors hope that this account will therefore serve as an example to other pipers, or scholars of piping, who wish to investigate further the as yet unexhausted contribution of Gaelic oral history to our understanding of piping's place in Scottish music.



NEIL MacMillan when Pipe Major of the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, c. 1950.

Photo: courtesy of Neil and Ann MacMillan

## FRIDAY 24 NOVEMBER 2006

**AFTER breakfast, we headed west in Gearraidh Bhailteas to the home of Neil MacMillan — Niall Sheonaidh Nill.**

Neil was a piper in the Cameron Highlanders in the period following the Second World War. He spoke about pipers who had lived

in the area, including Angus MacDonald of Gearraidh Bhailteas (*Aonghas Beag Dhòmhnaill ic Fheargais*) 'The King of Jigs', and the late Jessie MacAulay nee MacIntyre, or *Seonaid Dhòmhnaill Chorodail*, who stayed in Milton House (where Neil and his family grew up) while teaching at Cill Donain School in the 1930s.

Neil received his first lessons from Jessie while she stayed with the family. He sang a portion of a heavy 2/4 march he remembered learning from her. Decker played it back on the practice chanter, and Neil confirmed that he was “getting it right”. Although Decker didn’t know the tune, he believed that it was most likely *Pipe Major William MacLean*, by PM Peter MacLeod (John Wilson book, 1937, p. 12).

Angus MacDonald of Gearraidh Bhailteas owned an old handmade practice chanter that he kept, in Neil’s time, as a relic. It had been made to Angus’s specifications by a local carpenter who used a *giomlaid* (gimlet) to bore the chanter and a hot wire to make the sound holes. According to Neil, the chanter was reasonably cylindrical, had some beading at the top end and did not have a top section or mouthpiece.

Neil knew songs associated with piobaireachd and gave us an example of some words sung to *The Earl of Seaforth’s Salute*: “Slàn gun till fear a’ chinn duibh” (or “May the black-haired one return safely”). He had at first sung (or recited) these words to *Glengarry’s March*, but corrected himself. We asked where he had heard the words, but Neil did not recall.

During Josh’s past researches on Uist’s piping folklore, Seonaid Dhomhnaill Chorodail had been a good source of information on the “Pipers of Smearclait” (“Piobairean Smerclait”) — MacDonald of Clanranald’s fabled dynastic pipers in the southern Uist township. We asked Neil about this family and, in particular, about the alternative title, “Piobairean a’ Chlaiginn”, the name by which they were known among local Smearclait folk. “Claigneann” (to use the nominative form of the word) can mean the head of something, or the most fertile portion of a large farm; but is literally translated as “skull” or “scalp”. Jessie had interpreted “Piobairean a’ Chlaiginn” as “the Pipers of the Skull”, saying that the hill on which the family resided was known locally as “An Claigneann”. Neil remarked that a “claigneann” in that sense meant not so much “skull” as “top of the head” (a link to “scalp”?) and, with regard to the famous pipers of fairy lore, meant simply the “head, or top pipers of Uist”. The matter was compounded by Neil’s neighbour in Gearraidh Bhailteas, Angus Mackenzie, who suggested that the hill’s low, flat brow does indeed resemble the top of a head and could easily have earned it the name “An Claigneann” among those living in the

area. It may be safe to assume, then, that the title “Piobairean a’ Chlaiginn” referred to their living on a hill of that name. How interesting, though, to suppose that they may have been so-called by their neighbours on account of the good farmland they would have been allocated as Clanranald’s musicians?

We then headed to Ormaclait to visit Louis and Andrewina Morrison.

Louis is from a well-established Loch Eynort piping family that includes Willie Morrison (Louis’s nephew) and the late Donald Morrison (Aberdeen Police). He learned from his father, Donald John (*Dòmhnall Iain*) Morrison, who was a respected piper and piping teacher in the area. Louis has piped all of his life, been a regular competitor at the South Uist Games and the Flora MacDonald Cup and has taught a number of local pipers over the years. Louis, along with Calum Beaton, was involved with the creation of the current Bornish Piping Club. Andrewina was taught by Louis and his father, but is of the famous MacKillop family of pipers.

Louis learned in a very structured manner — with an emphasis on technique and literacy — using *MacLeod’s Tutor* (c. 1915). Andrewina’s instruction was the same.

Andrewina learned to make practice chanter

reeds from *corca mòr* (large oats) from her grandfather, John MacKillop. She began by cutting a short section of reed with scissors and then stripping the thin membrane-like outer skin off with her fingers. She then used the flat end of the scissors to flatten the top portion of the reed to make it supple. Often, she would then cut a section of straw, about half the length of the reed but thicker, and slot the reed into this. This outer skin enabled the reed to sit more firmly in the reed seat of the practice chanter. Andrewina could also tune the reed by sliding it up or down in the outer skin.

Louis was also familiar with the method of making practice reeds from *corca mòr* and made some himself with us, but used his teeth rather than the scissors to flatten the upper half of the reeds.

He recalled that practice chanter reeds could also be made from the corners of the inner box of a matchbox. The blades from an old manufactured practice chanter reed were used as templates for the blades made from the matchbox. A staple from a manufactured reed was also used.

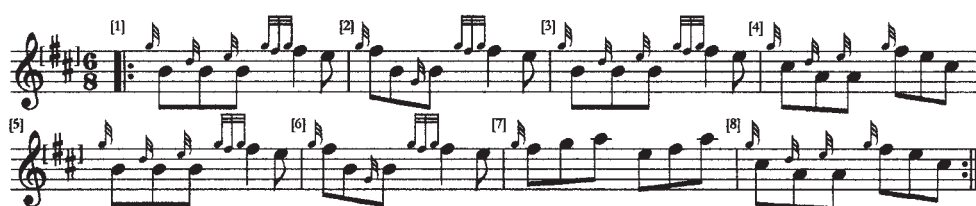
Decker took the opportunity to play a few bars of *Paddy’s Leather Britches* for Louis and Andrewina in a style reminiscent of Angus MacAulay’s c. 1950 recording (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Paddy’s Leather Britches* (jig) as played by Angus MacAulay (c. 1950 Danceland DL-607)



Louis and Andrewina confirmed that this faster, accented, staccato style of jig playing was more common at one time in Uist than the more even style heard today (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. *Paddy’s Leather Britches* (jig) arranged by Donald MacLeod (1954:40)





LOUIS remembered *Paddy's Leather Britches* being played in competitions prior to his own competitive career. Later, tunes he remembered being played at jig competitions were *The Hammer on the Anvil*, *Calleach an Dùdain* and *The Judge's Dilemma*.

Louis had heard that playing two-part marches, strathspeys, reels and jigs twice over for competitions was acceptable and gave *The Devil in the Kitchen* as an example, noting that it was "an old tune".

At about 3 p.m., we left the Morrisons and headed to Calum Beaton's house in Staoineabrog.

Calum (Calum Eairdsidh Choinnich) is from a family of pipers and has played the pipes all of his life. He is a tremendous source of information pertaining to pipers and piping in South Uist and each of us has interviewed and recorded Calum a number of times.

On this occasion, Calum spoke about homemade practice chanter reeds made from bamboo fishing rods he had seen in his youth. He also recalled his father once making a bass drone reed from the end of an old bamboo fishing rod. Calum went into detail about homemade practice chanter reeds, or *ribheidean*, made from *edrna* and *corca mòr*. He also told us that practice chanter reeds were occasionally made from the cane sides of matchboxes, which supported Louis's comments. Calum's father made a practice chanter reed and, apparently, a pipe chanter reed this way.

Calum played and spoke about *ceòl mòr*. He told us that the song *Isabel MacKay* used to be sung to the air of the piobaireachd *The Prince's Salute*. He had sung the song for Dr Peter Cooke in 1970. He also showed us how Bob Nicol taught him to play the F grace-note preceding the reflexive D in *Viscount of Dundee* extremely quickly:

Figure 3. Lament for the Viscount of Dundee (bar 2)



This differed from the more frequently performed version, found in *The Kilberry Book of Ceòl Mòr* (1948:26):

Figure 4. Lament for the Viscount of Dundee (bar 2)



JOSH Dickson talks with piper Calum Beaton at Calum's home in Staoineabrog, South Uist.

Photo: Decker Forrest



RODERICK (Ruairidh Roidein) MacDonald, left, and Hector MacFadyen perform at a wedding at St Aloysius, Glasgow (date unknown).

Photo: courtesy of Joan Martin

IN terms of note value, the whole motif was played as a D doubling with the F grace-note taking the place of the high G. Calum also remembered Nicol teaching a run-down in the first phrase, first variation of *The Bicker*, and noted that Bob Brown had taught this differently.

According to Calum, the jig repertoire at competitions in Uist was limited in his youth. Some of the jigs that were often played were *Lord Dunmore's Jig* (four part setting), *Cailleach*

*an Sgadain* (*The Herring Wife*), *Boc Liath Nan Gobher* (*The Shaggy Grey Buck*), *The Kitchen Maid*, *David Ross* by Angus MacAulay, Lovat Scouts (*John Wilson Collection*, 1937, p 34), *Paddy's Leather Britches* and *Cork Hill*.

Calum also spoke about various pipers he had known in Uist, including Neil MacDonald (Staoineabrog), Archie Beaton, his cousin Alasdair Beaton and neighbour Alan Cocoran. He remembered how he and Neil MacDonald would get lessons from Alasdair Beaton and

share Calum’s father’s pipes. Calum’s father had got these pipes from Alan Cocoran, an ear-learned piper who lived nearby and who knew only two or three tunes. These pipes were in tatters and bound all over with white string. The first “pipe sound” (sic) Calum heard as a child was Alan Cocoran playing this set. Calum remembered thinking at the time that Alan must have been a great player; only later in life, as experience and aesthetic sense developed, and in the knowledge that Alan only had two or three tunes altogether, did he revise his opinion of Alan’s standard as a piper.

Calum remembered an ear-learned piper from Iochdar named Angus Campbell (known locally as “the ‘Gighat’”). Angus could not read music, but played with conventional fingering and ornaments, with one exception — the frequent use of an F grace-note. Attending dances with Neil MacDonald, and hearing the Gighat play, Calum recalled agreeing with Neil that the Gighat’s use of the F grace-note seemed to jar, despite his otherwise excellent playing.

Elsewhere in our conversation, Calum played a four part reel on the practice chanter and sang the words (see Figure 5):



Decker Forrest (left) and Josh Dickson in front of the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (RSAMD) in Glasgow.

Photo: Frances Morton

Figure 5. *Dhiult am bodach fodar dhomh*\* (reel) as played by Calum Beaton, Staoineabrog

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TRANSLATED, the words read “The old man refused me fodder / The old man refused me fodder / The old man refused me ‘feudar, feader’ / In the barn, refused me his fodder.” We are still unclear as to the meaning of “feudar, feader” in the third phrase. It may simply be a nonsensical play on “fodar”. Also, the spelling “fiodar” may be a closer approximation of Calum’s pronunciation than “feudar”.

Similar words to this port were printed by Keith Norman MacDonald in his *Puirt-a-Beul* — *Mouth Tunes* (1901:25):

‘*Gu’n dhiult am bodach fodar dhomh*

*Gu’n dhiult am bodach fodar dhomh*  
*Gu’n dhiult am bodach luideach odhar*  
*Bha anns an t-sabhal fodar dhomh’.*

This tune, like many others, was included in bagpipe and fiddle collections between the mid 18th and late 19th centuries under various names and settings. The most popular titles in these collections were *Greig’s Pipes*, *The Daft Dairymaid* and *Fill the Stoup*. Pipers today will recognise Beaton’s fourth part as a common exercise for tachums. It first appeared as such in Donald MacPhee’s *Tutor* which prefaced his first collection (1876:IV).

Calum also sang bawdy verses to *Bothan a Bh’ aig Fionnghalla* and another unnamed song reportedly composed by Peter MacLeod in Iochdar.

We finally asked Calum about the jew’s harp, or *truimpe*. He told us that he had played one as a young man and played mostly reels, including *The High Road to Linton* and *Mrs MacLeod of Raasay*.

Eventually Calum’s son, Calum Antony, arrived and we all had a tune or two on the pipes — a fitting end to a very productive day. ●

• **Part 3 of 3: next issue.**