

# ‘Big Ronnie’ bridges the generations

Ronald Lawrie of Oban

**R**ONALD Lawrie of Oban isn't called 'Big Ronnie' for nothing.

But his broad-shouldered, six-foot-five frame and imposing, square-jawed presence are almost incidental to his considerable stature in piping — and an involvement that began with direct influences from the 19th century and continues into the 21st century.

Born in 1927, Ronald Lawrie remembers being awed, for example, by the playing of the great Pipe Major John MacColl (1860-1943) and taking lessons with the legendary Pipe Major William Ross (1879-1966).

Ronald Lawrie won the Highland Society of London Gold Medal at the Argyllshire Gathering in 1961 and led the Glasgow Police Pipe Band to its first Champion of Champions title win in 1967. His many students have included such distinguished players as Hector MacFadyen, the late Pipe Major Angus McDonald of the Scots Guards and double gold medallist Angus MacColl. He now serves as a distinguished and highly respected adjudicator.

His father was Angus 'Old Toasty' Lawrie who, with his brother, Kenneth, founded the Oban Pipe Band in 1925.

"The street I was born and brought up in was called Tweedle Street," said Ronald Lawrie. "Its real name was Happy Valley but it had been changed to Tweedle Street, and it was just full of pipers: MacInneses, MacFarlanes, Lawries... we were related to the MacInneses, and the MacInneses were related to John MacColl because the legendary John MacColl's mother was a MacInnes, so they

were related to us because my father's uncle was a MacInnes and all the MacInneses were more or less second cousins to me. And we were all in the one street.

"I remember playing the chanter as a young boy: I had one tune, *The Brown Haired Maiden*, just the notes, from memory. Then my father began to teach me.

"He was taught by Pipe Major Willie Ross who'd made trips to Oban to teach piping through the Piobaireachd Society. And my father was responsible for bringing him to Oban to tutor the band and teach young boys, so I joined Willie Ross's class when he came to Oban.

"He had fingers so crisp it was unbelievable... a birl, a doubling, they just flew out of the chanter, sparkling.

"As a teacher he wasted no time. He'd take a big yellow HB pencil in his fingers and say, 'this is how you hold your fingers straight' then he'd go right round the class and, if you didn't get it right the first time, he didn't waste too much time with you.

"After his lesson, he would take his pipes out and strike them up, give them a quick tuning and go straight into a march, strathspey and reel... a fascinating piper. He was a great object lesson in how to tune pipes without messing around."

Ronald Lawrie recalls watching William Ross set up the Oban Pipe Band. "Light brown plus-fours, he wore... he would go around the pipes in the band, take a set of pipes up, look at them, blow a drone, throw it onto his shoulder, take out a knife and you'd see flashes of cane coming off. Then, if something was

slack in the stock, his tongue would come out like a serpent and wrap around the bottom of the drone joint to wet it because he didn't have time to waste hemping up; that was up to you.

"He'd set the chanters and after 10 or 20 minutes you'd have a sound you'd never heard before."

Surrounded by piping, the young Ronald Lawrie grew up believing everybody played pipes. "And, as I got older, I wanted to play and play and play.

"John MacColl from Oban, although he was actually born and spent his early years in village called Kentallen, near Appin, had held a piping class in Oban and taught the Boys' Brigade band, and a number of pipers got tuition from him. My father was one of them. Some of John MacColl's top pupils also carried on teaching when John left to go to Glasgow. So it all came from there, my interest in piping."

Ronald Lawrie was 12 when he came by his first set of pipes, a "spare set" his father had in the house. "The printing on the box was 'Peter Henderson Limited Glasgow' but they weren't actually a Henderson set. I don't know what make they were but they were ebony and real silver and a good set of bagpipes."

He joined his father's Oban Pipe Band, then the local TA Pipes and Drums, the 8th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. This was the same battalion with which a talented piping relative from Ballachulish, William Lawrie, served as Pipe Major during the First World War. A double gold medallist and composer of note before the war, William Lawrie fell ill

RONALD LAWRIE with some of his trophies... "If you get your pipes going well and you think you're achieving a high or reasonably standard, well, that's the big reward for me: the enjoyment of playing. That's what my father did, my uncles and my relations... they got sheer enjoyment from their playing. And if you look for that, I don't think you can look for anything higher."



Photo: Mike Paterson

in France and was invalided back to Britain, but died in hospital of meningitis in 1916 at the age of 35.

When Ronald Lawrie joined the battalion in 1945 at the age of 18, the end of the Second World War was in sight. “I joined because the adjutant said ‘we want to start a pipe band’ but they didn’t have enough pipers or drummers. He asked for help to get it started with Pipe Major Johnnie (John M.) Mackenzie (who later became piping instructor at the famous Queen Victoria School in Dunblane). John MacKenzie was a good piper and a good composer... a very intelligent, interesting man, a good pipe major.

“At our first camp in 1946 there were only three of us. But towards the end of the following year, we had a pipe band from different parts of Argyllshire.

“We went away to camps all over the place and I thoroughly enjoyed it. We competed and I met interesting characters from all over Argyllshire, and very good pipers too. We had Mackenzies from Campbeltown, MacEacherns from Islay — people who, like myself, came from piping families and were very much into the piping.

“Neil MacEachern and I became particularly close friends. He went up north and got tuition from R. U. Brown at Balmoral. Neil was a natural player and a lovely singer, which would suit Bob Brown because he sang a lot of the tunes, and Neil could sing them as well.

“Then there was the Oban Pipe Band. We were the ‘dirty dozen’ because we’d tackle anything: *Donald Cameron*, the *Atholl Cummers* and *Pretty Marion*... never mind the crossing noises or the difficulties, we just crossed them. When we were in the third part of the *Duntroon* reel, on the repeat of that third bar, it was every man for himself. I enjoyed playing there.”

When he was 20, Ronald Lawrie moved to Glasgow to work and finish qualifying as a marine engineer. But, at the end of it, instead of going to sea, he went home to Oban. “The piping was too strong a call to ignore,” he said. “There was good piping in Glasgow but I could see that, if I went to sea, I’d not be involved with piping.”

He was by then a keen solo competitor: “I played in all the major competitions in Scotland

and I went down to London once or twice,” he said. “I enjoy Oban, Inverness, Cowal and I was quite successful most of the time.”

One of his most cherished trophies, however, is an insignificant-looking cup he won at a TA camp in Scarborough, England. “They held a company piping competition and I won this cup: the first cup I’d ever won.

“I also won the ‘best dressed piper’ that day because I’d switched belts with one of the best

could ever hope to hear. Robert Reid would play every week and you always got a piobaireachd,” said Ronald Lawrie.

“Most people latterly have stuck to the John MacDonald of Inverness styles but you can’t condemn other styles; they’re quite authentic. John MacDonald was a great admirer of the Cameron school and was going to go there himself.

“It was the Cameron side of piping that Robert Reid went for, and there are some real differences between that and the style of John MacDonald of Inverness. But Bob Brown, for instance, a first class piobaireachd player — one of the best I’ve heard — was a pupil of John MacDonald of Inverness but he didn’t play like John MacDonald of Inverness. On the other hand, his pal and colleague Bob Nicol played exactly like John MacDonald. Yet Bob Brown was probably the better player.

“They were both very good teachers and, with that John MacDonald of Inverness influence behind them, lots of pipers wanted to learn from them. But you had others with good knowledge in Glasgow: Robert Reid and his pupils.

“It wasn’t as prolific as the John MacDonald of Inverness influence but, if you heard Robert Reid playing a piobaireachd, it was outstanding; you couldn’t ask for better.”



THE EAGLE Pipers' Society 1965 Glen Medal for piobaireachd ... “a tenor started to go a bit funny— not off but, but I could feel it not pleasing, it was irritating. I looked at that medal and I remember thinking, ‘I’ve as much chance of winning you as a fly in the air’.”

spit and polish bullshitters there. He thought he was polishing his own kit. Then I said, ‘ooh, Tony, you’ve polished the wrong belt’ and put in on.”

After several years back in Oban, Ronald Lawrie returned to Glasgow where Pipe Major Donald MacLean, having left the Army after war service with the Seaforth Highlanders, had taken up the Corporation Transport Pipe Band. “It was an outstanding band and we had a lot of success with it for a short time before it started to break up, as bands tend to do after a while.”

And, every weekend, he played at the Scottish Pipers’ Association, founded in Glasgow by John MacDougall Gillies, Robert Reid’s tutor, who taught in the Cameron style of piping. “That’s where you heard the best piping you

THROUGH the Scottish Pipers’ Association, Ronald Lawrie had come to know a number of the Glasgow Police Pipe Band players: the band’s then pipe major, John MacDonald and his brother, Roderick, John Garroway, Major Archie McNab and others.

So, in 1953, having left the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders TA band, Ronald Lawrie moved on from the Corporation Transport Pipe Band and joined the Glasgow Police.

He was immediately taken into the band and soon began taking tuition with Robert Reid.

As a Police Constable, he said, he never encountered serious trouble. “There were some big guys around and hard cases but I found that, if you faced up to them and treated them right, there was a sort of hidden respect and I never had any problems... nothing we couldn’t handle.”

His regular duties were so congenial that he turned down promotions. “I was my own boss, and had a day shift. I went around the licensed brokers, pawn shops, bullion dealers and so on, supplying them with information about stolen goods, and checking their books.

“It was all so casual that I went to my sergeant one day to ask whether I was doing my job all right. And he said, ‘all we’re interested in is getting no complaints in from your area. If there are no complaints, we know you’re doing your job’. It was a mistake, turning down the promotions; they would have made a difference to my salary and pension, but I was very happy doing what I was and being involved in piping all the time.

“When I joined, we got a lot of privileges and, under John MacDonald, we got three or four practice afternoons a week.

“As time went on, that was stopped and you had to give a lot of your own time to practise. Later it reverted back to practically all day for band practice in the summer; you hardly did any police work at all. You just practised for competitions.

“That was under Iain MacLellan who was pipe major after me. He was with me in the band and we worked hard and got the band up to a reasonable standard. Then local body amalgamations brought the police districts together and we became the Strathclyde Police with more personnel to pick from and so on, and the band went up to the top.”

In 1961, Ronald Lawrie won the gold medal at the Argyllshire Gathering having previously placed second three times in a row. “Each time with the same tune,” he said: “*McIntosh’s Lament*.”

“So the fourth year, I took *McIntosh’s Lament* out and put in *The MacDougall’s Gathering*. That’s the tune they picked, and I won the medal.

“After that, I was going up to Inverness and getting places and finally I went up very, very determined... but I didn’t win, I got second.

“That was the end of my medal campaign for a while.”

But there were other competitions and they gave Ronald Lawrie considerable enjoyment. There was, for example, the particular satisfaction he took in winning the 1965 Edinburgh-based Eagle Pipers’ Society Glen Medal for piobaireachd.

“Hector MacFadyen and I — he was an excellent piper — saw this billboard announcing a

competition. It was offering £18 for a first prize. That was a phenomenal amount of money at that time. ‘That’s tremendous’, I said. ‘Never mind first prize, look at the fourth prize,’ said Hector. I think it was about £8. It was all big money. So we went through to Edinburgh.

“I was one of the last in the draw for the piobaireachd. The judges were all looking sternly down, pencils poised. The pipes weren’t bad. I got tuned up and was going quite well. Then, as I passed the judges’ platform, my eye fell on another table with all the prizes on it, and there was this glorious big silver medal with an eagle on it.

“It struck me right away ... and a tenor started to go a bit funny— not off exactly, but I could feel it, it was irritating. I looked at that medal and I remember thinking, ‘I’ve as much chance of winning you as a fly in the air’.

“I finished my piece as best I could, walked out of the hall and into the bar and got a beer. Hector came in and said, ‘you played very well’. ‘Did you not feel one of my tenors was a bit off?’, I asked him. While we were talking, a steward came in and said, ‘congratulations, you’ve won the piobaireachd’. I could have fallen down.

“That made it memorable. I really hadn’t thought I’d a chance but I got the medal to keep... and the money.”

Ronald Lawrie officially became pipe major of the Glasgow Police Pipe Band in 1967 but by then he had been virtually running the band for two years as pipe sergeant under the leadership of Angus MacDonald from Uist who, by that stage, was on a career path to promotion. He had taken the band on at a low ebb, its ranks having been depleted by illness, retirements and a scarcity of emerging talent, and re-organised it to the point that it successfully resumed competing in 1961.

When he was promoted to Chief Inspector in 1966, Angus MacDonald became Band President. Ronald Lawrie took over as pipe major — and led the band to its first Champion of Champions title the following year. “You had the Edinburgh Police, Shotts’ and Muirhead’s, and you had to be up there with them if you were going to make any impression,” said Ronald Lawrie.

“We had a good sound,” he said. “We worked hard on the sound.

“It was mostly the drone sound I worked on because George MacDonald from Dunoon (the pipe major who led the Millhall Scout Pipe

Band to victory at the Pipe Band Championships at Cowal in 1924, 1926 and 1930) told me: ‘never mind the chanter. They’re important, but concentrate on your drones. A good drone sound will enhance your chanters.’

“I always remembered that advice. My father was always talking about how impressed he was with the drone sound of the band under George MacDonald. And, when George told me himself to concentrate on the drone sound, I did the same. And it certainly worked for me,” said Ronald Lawrie.

“Robert Reid had the idea that, to get a proper drone sound, the bottom section of your two tenors should match the bottom joint of the bass. Most bass bottom joints back then had a bigger bore than the tenors. So he decided to make his bass drone bore the same diameter as his tenor drones, and take the same pressure. Also, the narrower bore in the bass drone bottom joint gave you a deeper bass sound. And it’s amazing how that enhanced the chanter sound too.

“Now, modern bagpipes all have a narrow bore in the bottom joints of the bass drone.

“It was Robert Reid who started that. Then Robert Hardie, one of his top pupils, went into pipe making and created the first five-in-a-row world championships’ winning band. He had a fabulous pipe band with Muirhead and Sons.”

After three or four years, however, the Glasgow Police Pipe Band began to visibly weaken again until the influx of fresh blood and resourcing it received as Strathclyde, when it surged ahead.

“I didn’t do much after we became the Strathclyde Police because I’d retired from the force and Iain MacLellan had taken over just before that. And he took things from strength to strength. I helped in the background as I could. But I wouldn’t take any credit at all for Iain’s successes; he’s his own man and he did a great job. He was a good man, a good pipe major.”

It was while he was pipe major of the Glasgow Police Pipe Band that Ronald Lawrie wrote one of his best-known compositions, *The Glenfinnan Highland Gathering*.

“I have made tunes since the late 1940s,” he said, “mostly 2/4 marches and some slow marches, and most of them went into the wastepaper basket. When I make a tune, I try to make sure it’s a good one.

“One day a piper came up to me one day and told me: ‘I hate that damned *Glenfinnan Highland Gathering* tune.’ I asked him why. He said, ‘because I was judging an amateur competition recently and of the 30 competitors who played, 29 played *The Glenfinnan Highland Gathering*.’ I told him he was entitled to hate it.”

Now, Ronald Lawrie is helping his cousin, Angus Lawrie, to produce a book, *The Lawrie Collection*. “It comprises all the tunes by the legendary Willie Lawrie, my cousin Angus and his son, Kenneth, and some of my tunes,” he said. “There’ll be quite a lot of tunes in there.

“I’ve written a tribute to John D. Burgess I hope people will enjoy: *The High Plateau*, named for an experience John and I had many years ago. We were on a high plateau competing on the Isle of Mull, overlooking the Sound of Mull. The weather was nice; it was a beautiful view.

“Later, we were at a band competition. John was the pipe major of the Edinburgh Police, and I was with the Glasgow Police. We were in the hollow square, waiting for the prize list to be announced. But the high jump final was still going on and they were putting the bar higher and higher to get a winner. We were hot and tired, and John was looking very miserable.

“I walked over to him and he looked at me quizzically, like he thought I was going to pull a fast one on him or something. I said to him, ‘John, how’d you like to be on a high plateau overlooking the Sound of Mull right now... away from all of this?’ — his face cleared and his eyes went misty. ‘Oh, Ronnie,’ he said wistfully, ‘wouldn’t that be just lovely’. I remembered that when he died... the high plateau, and I made the tune for him.”

Other tunes by Ronald Lawrie include the 2/4 march *Anne Edgars*, *Dr Herb Dedo’s March* which celebrates an American specialist who successfully treated ear problems Ronald Lawrie was experiencing in 1980, *Ina MacKenzie*, *Mrs Betty Hardie* and a number of others.

“I haven’t completed a piobaireachd yet, though... just wee themes here and there.

“But a piobaireachd was made for me recently by my cousin, Angus: *Salute to Pipe Major Ronnie Lawrie*. He’s going to put it in the book when it comes out — this year hopefully.”

FOLLOWING his retirement from the Glasgow Police, Ronald Lawrie went home to Oban where a job and a house awaited, and his elderly mother still lived. “We sold off in

Glasgow in 1975 and have stayed in Oban ever since,” he said.

But the expected job fell through.

“Then I was asked to play pipes in McTavish’s Kitchen on George Street here in Oban. They wanted me to play for a Scottish show, playing for dancers and piping selections... all traditional Scottish stuff.

“I did that for nearly 28 years and it brought in some income to supplement the pension in the summer, quite good income it was too.

“Angus MacColl and I got to play in McTavish’s together because he’d relieve me whenever I was away. Then they needed two pipers, then three pipers, then four pipers. Most recently, there was Iain Hurst, pipe major of the local band now, and three of my pupils: Euan Dewar, Angus MacColl and Donny Files.

“Sadly, it’s just closed for the first time since 1963.”

While Ronald Lawrie was seen less often on the solo competing platform after his last bid for the Northern Meeting gold medal, he found a new way to enjoy the solo competitions: judging them.

“I did go back later for a wee while and was doing reasonably well but what stopped me was that I went to a competition one year and one of the stewards said ‘we’re short of a piping judge’ and asked me to judge.

“It happened again the next week. After that, I was judging all over the place, and I found it was good fun, judging. So I have carried on.”

Last year, he adjudicated for the senior piobaireachd and jig events at the Argyllshire Gathering; the former winners’ march-march, strathspey-strathspey and reel-reel, the B-grade march and the B-grade strathspey and reel at the Northern Meeting; the A-grade piobaireachd at Roseneath; and all of the piping at the Tobermory Highland Games, at Arisaig and at the Uist and Barra Competitions in Glasgow... Ronald Lawrie’s is a familiar face on the judges’ bench.

“Usually at the big competitions, and often at lesser competitions too, you have two or three judges. I prefer to have another opinion because what someone else and I think can be two different things,” he said. “I like to sum up with someone else, argue the point if necessary, and come up with what we think is a proper decision.

“You can take into account, say, how a march ought to be played. A lot of competitors can’t play marches these days, not the way

I was taught. You can say that comes down to a personal opinion. And I think when you weigh it all up, that’s what most judges do: it’s a personal opinion.

“What else can you think of? You try to take everything into consideration.”

BY 1996, when the Argyll and Bute Council’s education department ultimately came to an agreement with the Argyllshire Gathering Trust to provide piping tuition at Oban’s primary and secondary schools, Ronald Lawrie had already put in 15 years of teaching at Oban High School.

“The schools in Argyll were very poor for piping provision, especially in northern Argyll, where we are, Oban,” he said..

“If you went north where John Burgess and Iain MacFadyen taught, local authorities were all very much behind it, and there was more interest in piping. In southern and in mid-Argyll there has been stronger interest.

“But it got very weak in Oban. John MacColl had a lot of pipers in the Boys’ Brigade. Then, after he left, it was all bugle bands. It had been dead for a long time when I started; it was like trying to re-light a fire that had burned out.

“Ronnie MacCallum had been teaching in the schools part-time but he had all the schools: in Lochgilphead, Tarbert, Inverary... he did a good job covering a large area. But, when he retired, the thing went flat. The council was saying it had no money and all this carry-on.

“In the schools, girls were taking up the pipes, which was fine, but too few boys. And some seemed to be doing it just to get away from regular classes for a wee while. It could be a nightmare at times.”

Four years ago, Ronald Lawrie handed the job over to Angus MacColl and, he said, “it’s coming back now.”

At 80, Ronald Lawrie continues to play — “in my bedroom most of the time,” he said, “and mostly piobaireachd.

“If you get your pipes going well and you think you’re achieving a high or reasonable standard, well, that’s the big reward for me: the enjoyment of playing.

“That’s what my father did, my uncles and my relations... they got sheer enjoyment from their playing. And if you look for that, I don’t think you can look for anything higher.” ●