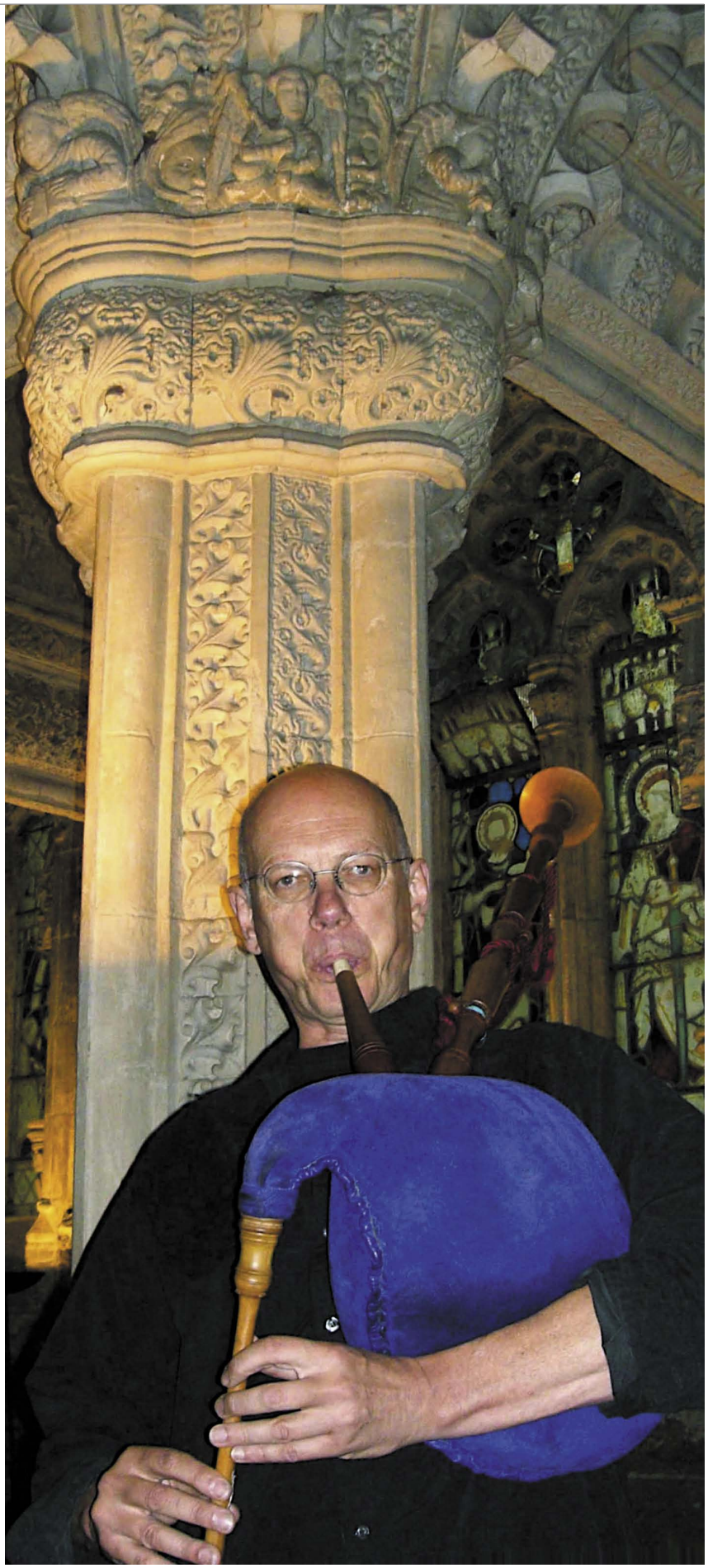
Life and times of the 'Lowland' pipes

PETE STEWART



PETE STEWART plays his Julian Goodacre 'English great' pipes at Rosslyn Chapel… "Popular music is one of the areas of ancient Scottish history that has been much overlooked. For instance, the pipe and tabor as music and the Morris as a display dance don't figure strongly in most popular ideas of Scottish culture, but are well documented in the 16th century. The whole question of popular culture in these times has received very little attention, which is unfortunate since bagpipes played a major role there, in addition to their ceremonial, civic and ecclesiastical use."

IN his new book, *Welcome home my dearie — piping in the Scottish Lowlands 1690-1900*, Pete Stewart addresses a widespread unconcern for what was almost certainly Britain's most widely-owned popular bagpiping tradition: a loosely shared heritage that for several centuries stretched from Scotland's northeast deep into northern England and was to the fore in the populist music of its day.

Pete Stewart draws together an array of previously scattered evidence and, drawn together, it presents a strikingly coherent picture.

Pete Stewart plays fiddle and pipe and tabor for dancing, and teaches piping for dancing. He plays 18th century-style Scottish small pipes and the Bulgarian gaida. He also is an avid scholar and determined researcher into the piping heritage of the Scottish Lowlands and England.

"I'm in the privileged position of being able to go to the National Library of Scotland and read these sources. If I lived almost anywhere but where I do, in East Lothian, and didn't have a free bus pass, I wouldn't be able to do this sort of thing," he said.

His interest in piping history was kindled in the mid-1980s when the Peebles-based pipe maker Julian Goodacre re-created an 'English great pipe', a instrument that Pete Stewart has since been playing as a member of The Goodacre Brothers trio.

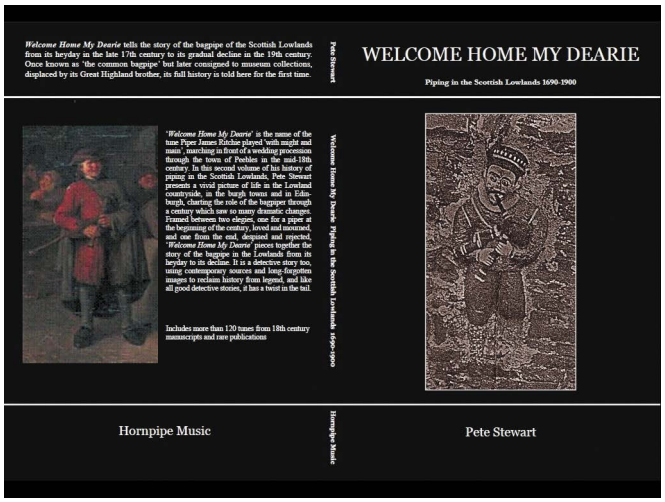
He has published two previous books on piping history: *Robin with the Bagpipe – The English Bagpipe and its Music* (2001) and *The Day it Daws: The Lowland Scots bagpipe and its Music 1400-1715* (2005). He also has published an edition of three rare fiddle music books — *Three Extraordinary Collections: Early 18th Century Dance Music for Those that Play Publick* — that includes an essay on the triple-time hornpipe.

Pete Stewart was involved in the 2007 performance and recording of the *Rosslyn Motet*, a realisation by father and son composers Thomas and Stuart Mitchell of the music they saw encoded in stone at 15th century Rosslyn Chapel. "Whatever I might think about that project now, it certainly opened my eyes to the real story about Rosslyn," said Pete Stewart. "At the same time I became aware of the importance of the musicians carved there. It never ceases to amaze me, that they have never, to my knowledge, been described and discussed in detail.

"But then, popular music is one of the areas of ancient Scottish history that has been much overlooked," he said. "For instance, the pipe and tabor as music and the Morris as a display dance don't figure strongly in most popular ideas of Scottish culture, but are well documented in the 16th century. The whole question of popular culture in these times has received very little attention, which is unfortunate since bagpipes played a major role there, in addition to their ceremonial, civic and ecclesiastical use. This tradition is only now beginning to be more widely recognised, and is something I hope to explore further.

"Any picture of the past is inevitably coloured by current needs," he said. "But the broader, more rich the picture we have of the past, the better it must be, and the better must be our understanding of how we've come to be the way we are.

"For several decades, a small but growing number of people have been aware of this tradition. A good deal of information has been published, mostly in the journal of the Lowland and Border Pipers Society, *Common Stock*, but full knowledge of it hasn't really made it into the mainstream world of Highland piping.



WELCOME HOME MY DEARIE — piping in the Scottish Lowlands 1690-1900 is a new book by Pete Stewart's account of the Lowland bagpipes tradition: a loosely shared heritage that for several centuries stretched from Scotland's northeast deep into northern England and was to the fore in the populist music of its day.

'JOUER DE CORNEMUSE', a portrait painted in 1750 by Philippe Mercier (1689-1760) during a visit to Edinburgh: the first picture to show in detail a bagpipe with the features now recognised as distinguishing the "Lowland bagpipe".

"What I tried to do in this book was to pull all of this information together and place it in the social context of life in Scotland in the 18th century. In the process of tracing original sources for some of this information, I uncovered additional material which gives a richer picture. The fact that piping has been getting more diverse helps us to better appreciate the information. There was a time when, in common opinion, any piping outside of Highland piping was not taken seriously."

But, outside of the Highlands, piping was vigorous. "Keith Sanger has been putting together a database of named, officially recorded pipers in the Lowlands," said Pete Stewart. "The last time I spoke to him about it, he had more than 250 pipers, dating from the 1400s to the mid 18th century. I don't think that can be matched from what's known of Highland piping prior to 1750."

Welcome home my dearie is the name attached to the two source forms of a "double hornpipe" that has variously been associated with wedding festivities both in the Scottish Border town of Peebles and the far-off Shetland Islands, and is found in Neil Stewart's *A Collection of Reels and Country Dances* from 1761.

More than 120 tunes, variants and songs are included in the new book, along with many contextual notes, lyrics, snippets of history and explanations. The main text is a drawing together of some vivid social history, organological and pictorial evidence, observations and analysis that, as a body of research, topples simplistic views of British piping traditions.

The 'Lowland pipes' tradition has few consistencies, even in relationship to the instrument that, since the 1920s has often been referred to as the "half long" pipes and a century previously was called the "common bagpipe" — at least by the Highland Society of London competition officials who, in 1821, turned away the unfortunate James Budge who had traveled all the way from Caithness to Edinburgh hoping to try for a prize using his bellows-blown instrument.

"In the early 18th century, we find people like George Skene who were familiar with a variety of bagpipes, big and small, bellows and mouth blown, single and double chanters," said Pete Stewart. "In addition, it is clear that players may each have had their own playing styles. The extent of variety remains to be studied in detail. What I have concentrated on in this book is the history of the instrument that survives today in museums labeled 'Lowland Bagpipe', and which has formed the inspiration for today's revival."

Apart from their bellows, the Lowland pipes' most defining characteristic, said Pete Stewart, long seems to have been the way they are carried, with the drones over the arm. "Carrying that long bass drone over the arm is a strange thing to do," he said, "yet it's almost a defining characteristic.

"Beyond that, there is little uniformity in size, materials, design or drone configuration among the earliest examples that survive." Chanters in Edinburgh University's collection range from 286 to 386 millimeters in length with bores ranging from 12.5 to 18 millimeters.

"The pitch of the chanter is generally around 'A' but some are as low as 'G' and some are

'*INTERIOR SCENE WITH BAGPIPER*': the perplexing oil painting attributed to the 'elder' Egbert van Heemskerk (1610-1680) by Southeby's auctioneers in 2007 that depicts a surprisingly recent-looking set of Lowland bagpipes. Egbert va Heemskerk's son, Egbert van Heemskerk II, painted ca.1634-1704; and his son, Egbert van Heemskerk III was active in the period 1700-1744… "The painting's not in very good condition and it's not a detailed representation but, given the intentions he had, Heemskirk produced a pretty good picture of a bagpipe that's remarkably similar to instruments we have examples of … it looks exactly like it 'ought' to look. And that's what's so surprising."

higher than 'A' in our terminology," said Pete Stewart. "And the drone configuration is usually Highland, with two tenors and a bass. I don't think there's any reason to say, as it's often said, that where you have three different drones those are the Northumbrian pipes.

"Other than that, you often have a little alto drone that I think was used as a tuning device and stopped up for playing. It's the sort of drone that'll give you the same pitch as the bottom note on your chanter … it's often turned and shaped in a very different way from the other drones. It looks as though somebody has taken a smallpipes' drone and stuck it in the stock."

Pete Stewart said he included a selection of photographs of instruments in his book in order to show the lack of a consistent design. "Pipe-maker Richard Evans, who measured these instruments at the Morpeth Chantry Museum, tells me that, in the main, the finger-holes are just an inch apart and the tuning has been done by undercutting the holes — and you get the impression just looking at them that either makers were experimenting with all sorts of different appearances — drone ends in particular. Different makers had completely different ideas about the effects of the shape of the drone end on the character of the drone sound. Unfortunately, we don't have enough evidence to make a comparison with Highland pipes to see how varied they were before the end of the 18th century. But I'd suspect they'd have been similarly diverse."

"Very little is known about the making of bagpipes prior to the late 18th century", said Pete Stewart.

"The general impression you get is that bagpipes were made by wood turners and wood turners turned all sorts of things. So somebody who wanted bagpipes mended or made probably went to a wood turner and said, 'if I tell you what to do, can you do it?'

"There are some texts that say more or less exactly that… that the piper stood over the wood turner while the wood turner worked and told him how to do it. So it's not surprising that all the pipes would be so completely different because any piper could say, 'I want one of these, but I don't like this'; 'I like that', 'I saw this at so-and-so and it had this bit I quite liked'… so you'd find markedly different instruments possibly being made by the same maker,

but made to the different specifications of different pipers. Then, presumably, once a maker was shown, or discovered a valuable feature, he would want to incorporate it in all his pipes. There appears to have never been a precise definition of what a Lowland pipe should look like, not in the same way the Highland pipe came to be defined

"The further back you go in time, the more varied they become until you get back to the 1750s when it looks as though two drones were more common than three but, again, there isn't much evidence," he said.

"The instruments that are said to be 'really old' typically lack reliable provenance. There's no really convincing information, and you're left deciding whether you should believe the legend or not. It reduces ideas about the development and the history to pure speculation. That was my standpoint when I started the book: that, for the whole history of these instruments prior to about 1760, we don't have enough definite evidence to say anything for certain."

Pete Stewart's view, when he began work on *Welcome home, my dearie*, was that the Lowland pipe in its best known form was a late development — that, after all sorts of variations and experiments in instrument design during the18th century, a more standardised form emerged late in the century as a bellows adaptation of Highland pipes. "What we call a Lowland pipe now is essentially a half or three-quarter size, bellows-blown, set of Highland pipes with the drones in a common stock," he said "what is sometimes referred to as 'Reel Pipes'.

"Many of the old instruments, although they're quite varied, pretty much answer that description. They look like late-18th century Highland pipes put into a common stock," he said.

Then, just as he was completing his book, Pete Stewart came across an early picture that presented him with one inconveniently exciting insight — that his theory was a mistaken one — but no clear answers.

The picture is an oil painting of a tavern scene attributed to the Dutch artist Egbert van Heemskirk I who moved to England in 1674. There is an engraving produced by Robert Sayer dating from around 1770 of which Pete Stewart had been aware of. However, he had not realised, until this point, that it was based on another painting by a "Hemskirk". This image too shows a set of pipes that closely resemble the Lowland pipes of a later period.

"The Egbert van Heemskerk depiction is so like the instrument we'd expect to see, it must be right," said Pete Stewart. "The painting's not in very good condition and it's not a detailed representation but, given the intentions he had, Heemskirk produced a pretty good picture of a bagpipe that's remarkably similar to instruments we have examples of … it looks exactly like it 'ought' to look, and that's what's so surprising. It certainly upended my original argument… it was quite a moment when I came across those pictures.

"And yet it surprises me that there's no written mention of it. You get descriptions of bagpipes, you get descriptions of bagpipes with bellows… there is a description Keith Sanger found in a play by Thomas Shadwell from 1671 that talks about a 'Scotch bagpipe with a flaw in the bellows'… but we can't be sure whether these are smallpipes or not. The chances are that Shadwell was referring to smallpipes because the next thing you hear about any 'Scotch bagpipe' it's the smallpipe that's being described (in 1690 manuscript by James Talbot). But now we've got this painting and Shadwell could just as possibly have been talking about this instrument… you just don't know," said Pete Stewart.

"These pictures are certainly earlier than any evidence we've seen before. But all they really make clear is that we're still pretty ignorant — and we are likely to remain that way now because the art experts can't help us to date these paintings and, without dates, they're not a lot more use than anything else really. The possibility remains that they could just be as late as the early 1740s. That's still the earliest depiction of the instrument, but not as controversial, perhaps, as the other possibility, that they date from 1680 or before."

Pete Stewart's work has made it clear, however, that regional differences within the reach of the Lowland pipes' tradition were not as clearly demarcated as the commonly used terms of today might imply.

"There's been a recent tendency to link Lowland and Border piping together in a way that gives the impression that distinguishable concepts of music exist here," he said. "But the whole bellows piping thing was spread from Aberdeenshire in the north southwards certainly as far as Lancashire or Cheshire. Within that, there may well have been varieties of musical dialect, but we should be careful, for example, about defining a unique 'Border' tradition.

"The first time the term 'Border pipes' was used was in the early 19th century by Alexander Campbell, whose clear concern was to establish a 'Border' tradition, just as people in Ireland at the time were trying to establish an 'Irish' tradition. It arose at around the time the instruments were disappearing… as a part of an attempt to reclaim a tradition and give it an identity that it possibly didn't have.

"The musical tradition survived in the northeast of England, perhaps because of the patronage that was given the smallpipes, in a way that didn't happen anywhere else. It's become possible to talk about 'Border music' because there is such a thing surviving today. But the music, the way it was played, further north and further south didn't survive so, while there's the appearance of a 'Border tradition', I'm not sure that, in the 18th century, it would have been seen that way at all."

And the first time the term "Lowland bagpipe" is used, to the best of Pete Stewart's knowledge, is in the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. This was almost entirely the work of the eccentric Edinburgh polymath James Tytler whose largely overlooked achievements include having been the first Briton to make and fly in a hot air balloon. Between 1776 and 1784 he almost single-handedly revised the encyclopedia's original edition, enlarging it from three volumes to 10 — a work of 8,595 pages.

"He knew what he was talking about," said Pete Stewart. "He was a piper, he played the Irish bagpipes and he described an instrument that doesn't match anything for which we have any other record. His *Encyclopaedia Britannica* entry is one of the things that makes it clear the subject is more confusing than we thought it was and I think that's my overall conclusion: that this homogenous idea of a 'Lowland bagpipe' can't really be sustained until the end of the 18th century when all of the others had been diffused and the pastoral pipes had really taken over — or whatever the pastoral pipes became with their various names and descriptions."

Also, other instruments were beginning to make inroads into contexts that had formerly favoured bagpipes.

"In the late 17th century and early 18th centuries, musicians were travelling around all over Europe, and not just itinerants but professional musicians," said Pete Stewart. "One of the things that precipitated a lot of the changes that took place was the fact that people trained

in one place were trying to play in another place, particularly in terms of issues like the pitch they were playing at.

"I'd long had this vague idea that there was a 'Baroque pitch' that was different to the one we have now," he said. "But I didn't realise how complex it was and now I'm very hesitant about saying these old pipes were in such-and-such a pitch because it's fairly meaningless — different systems of pitch definition were in use, often more than one in one place, for different instruments, and these differed across Europe.

"But I think it was changes of musical taste that led to the fiddle being much more appropriate and widely approved. The impact on popular music of the Baroque composers in Italy and France is only just beginning to be widely acknowledged, and one of the features of this music was a new taste for expressiveness.

"From the start of the 18th century, in educated musical circles, people just wanted more from their music, and that then filtered through society," said Pete Stewart. "By the time of the Gows, the late 18th century, fiddle music was the thing, and pipes began losing ground, their capacity for expressiveness being singularly limited.

"The Baroque pipes tried desperately to keep up but, not only were they very difficult to play, but also they seem to have never attained the voice, the expressiveness, of the fiddle… except for the Irish who managed to develop the instrument to the point where it did keep up. The Scots seemed to give up and go with the fiddle.

"The question with an obvious answer is why the Highland bagpipes survived — one was the nationalism and the other was the army. One of the things that grew up alongside the Napoleonic wars and revolutionary fervor was the idea of national history and identity that was up for grabs at the end of the 18th century. All of the ideas of ancient races and so on were political arguments as much as anything else.

"By the 19th century, more or less the only people playing bagpipes that weren't Highland pipes were gentlemen playing some kind of Neo-Baroque instrument; the 'Lowland pipes', which had been a populist instrument, disappeared, as the common people who had once danced to them followed the fashionable fiddle.

"It's why so many of the older type of Lowland pipe can be found in museums. There are hardly any Highland pipes of that age in museums and yet museum collections of bagpipes from the 18th century are full of Lowland pipes… loads of them. That has to be because people just stopped playing the Lowland pipes, they weren't handed down from father to son but from father to collector.

"There are records of people who were collectors at the beginning of the 19th century. Their collections eventually found their way into museums; the instruments had acquired a value as historical artifacts rather than as musical instruments." ●