

Tunes from a silent chanter

Mòd tribute to GS McLennan

THIS October, the Royal National Mòd comes to Caithness for the first time. Once established, the Mòd Fringe committee immediately sought to get the local community involved and were on the lookout for suggestions to enhance the Mòd experience for visitors and locals alike. One of the results is a temporary exhibition of the life and works of GS McLennan to be held in the St Fergus Gallery, Wick, from late September and throughout the Mòd.

It is 81 years since Pipe Major George Stewart McLennan died at the very early age of 45. Those brief years of his life were filled with a vast range of achievements, experiences and friendships. Today, every piper knows at least a part of his greatest legacy — the phenomenal catalogue of pipe music — and for many perhaps without any knowledge of the composer.

Since the death of GS (for it was as “GS” that he was, and is, referred to by all and sundry) most evidence of his life has been retained within the McLennan family. After his death, many medals and items of uniform were donated to the Military Museum at Edinburgh Castle by his brother John, who was also known to hand out medals to interested customers of his Edinburgh hostelry.

Of GS’s own two sons, John — the younger of the two — died near St Valéry-en-Caux in Normandy in 1940, a Gordon Highlander like his father, serving in the 51st Highland Division. His elder son, George, survived St Valéry and the ensuing five years as a POW and for the remainder of his life he was the guardian of the surviving components of his father’s legacy — books, manuscripts, notebooks, photographs and medals.

On his death in 1996, George left many of the books he had inherited to the National Libraries of Scotland and these have been well used by pipers since. Following the subsequent death of George’s wife, Jessie, four years ago, everything that remained passed to the next McLennan generation — my brother and myself.



A child portrait of GS McLennan, taken while visiting P/M John Stewart (Uncle Jack) and family in Dundee.

Disappointingly, on trying to organise and catalogue this archive, we discovered that some items and original documents appear to have been lost in the intervening years. However, we were in total agreement that now was the time to bring much of the hidden life and works of GS into the public gaze. And, given that I live in Caithness and that my daughter is actively involved in two Gaelic Choirs and indeed the Mòd itself, here was the ideal opportunity to present GS in the 21st century and hopefully add something of interest to the event, its participants and visitors.

In terms of pipe music composition GS was, without doubt or bias, one of the giants of the last century. A quick look at the catalogue of his works reveals many tunes that have stood the test of time — whether for pipers playing competitively or purely for pleasure. Many have become more than pipe tunes and have become standards of the traditional music genre and beyond. In this respect *The Jig of*

Slurs stands out above all. As a consequence he has frequently fallen victim to having his works performed and recorded under the authorship of the dreaded “Trad. Arr.”

In competition, he should have been peerless. However, not only was this somewhat of a golden age of great pipers (McLennan, Ross, Macdonald, Center, et. al.), but he was greatly constrained by being a Regular Army Pipe Major. His many and varied postings and Regimental commitments meant that many competitions were missed.

One of the Games where he certainly made his mark was at Aboyne. Over the 24 years spanning his attendance at competition there (from 1904 to 1927), he achieved 15 first places in marches — in all the other years he had been unable to attend. But not every event was a site of regular triumphs.

In 1907 he wrote: “If there is such a thing as an unlucky place for anyone, the Fort William (Lochaber) Games is one of my unlucky places. Since the first time I went there — with my father — in 1898, I have not had a good day at it. Of course, during the years of 1900, 1901 and 1902 I did not attend any games as I was stationed at that time in Aldershot and Portsmouth with the Details of my Regiment and could not get away in the summer.”

This scrap from his notebook appears in the exhibition, together with a letter from Willie Ross which illustrates both the camaraderie of the competition rivals of the time and the feeling that they had been usurped as the darlings of the circuit. Ross had been disqualified at Inverness and GS McLennan had refused to compete unless he was reinstated.

Willie Ross, in this personal letter to GS, noted: “I can assure you, George, that many of my friends told me since the affair that if ever I had a friend and fellow competitor it was George MacLennan (sic). And I can assure you that it touched me very much when I heard of the attitude you took up in my favour. I am quite sure that a good many were surprised. I shouldn’t really be surprised myself because you



GS McLennan at the Games

were always my best friend and in fact longest acquaintance as a competitor.” Willie Ross was subsequently reinstated and won with GS coming second. A punishment for interfering with the judgement perhaps? For Willie Ross continues: “...Even my own mother knew who the better piper was that day.”

The exhibition will go under the title of *Tunes From a Silent Chanter*, the intended name of the second book of the works of GS McLennan. He died before it came to fruition, indeed just after the publication of his first book, *Highland Bagpipe Music*, and a large part of his works

remained unpublished until the publication of the two volumes of the *The Gordon Highlanders Pipe Music Collection* in the 1980s.

His brother Donald (DR) MacLennan together with my father, Brian MacRae and Sir Peter Graham worked through the collection to prepare and, where applicable, title the “new” tunes ready for publication. As a consequence, many more of his works are now in the public domain.

There are two slightly conflicting reasons for *Tunes From a Silent Chanter* being chosen as the exhibition title, both of which originate from

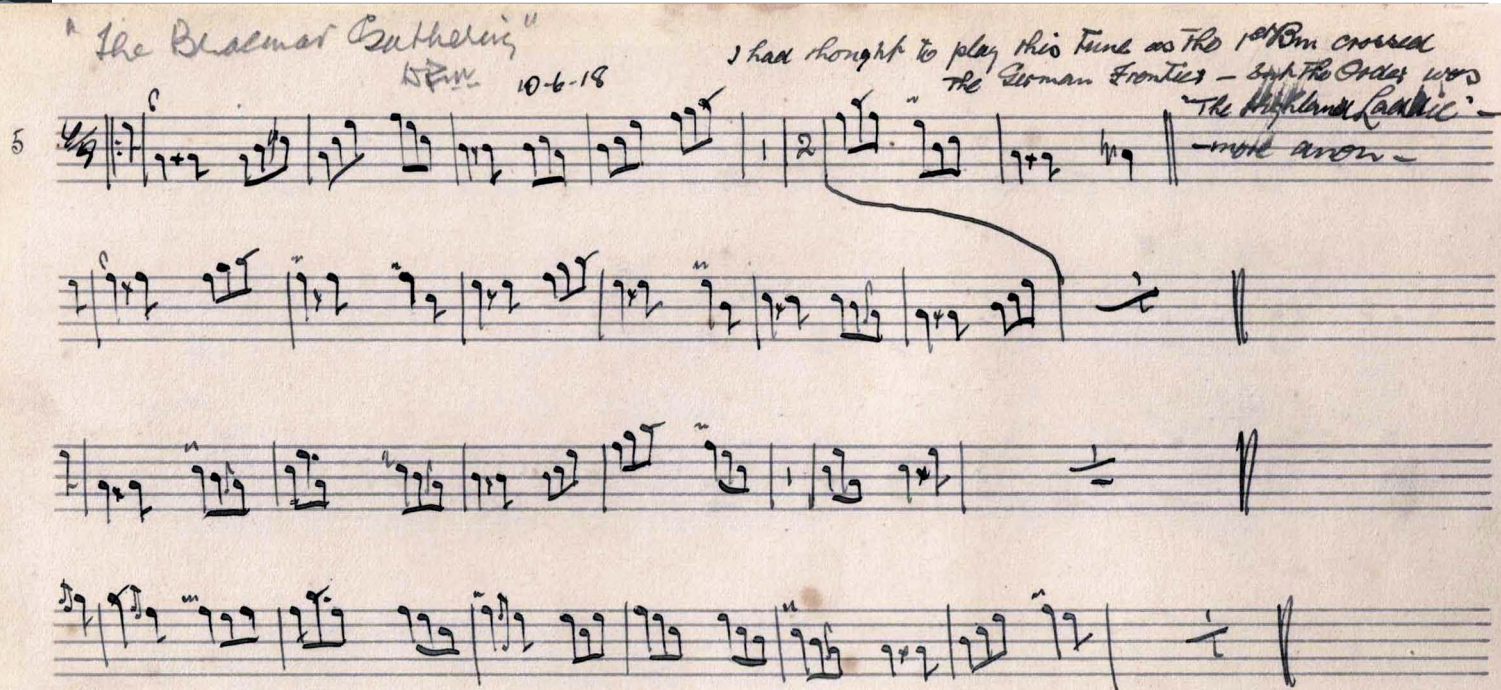


The funeral cortege of GS McLennan arriving at Aberdeen Station en route to Edinburgh. His son George can be seen (wearing cap) behind the pall bearers. Aged 15, he then left school to become the family breadwinner as an apprentice joiner. 20,000 people lined the streets of Aberdeen between the family home in Powis Place and Aberdeen Station.

my father. I recall that he had told me that, in the trenches during World War I, GS had spend much of his time in the company of his chanter. Rather like lighting a cigarette in the trench, playing music was prohibited as it was an invitation for the enemy to both identify Scottish troop positions and target the player, so he played without a reed. As with any good piper, he did not require the reed to “hear” what his fingers were playing. Thus he practised and composed throughout the tedium of trench life. Hence *Tunes From a Silent Chanter*.

However, in researching the family archive for this exhibition, I came across this note from my father, George. He writes: “Book I of my father’s music was printed and delivered to him a few weeks before he died. The corrections, of which there were many, took a great deal out of him and he told me then, in his usual humorous manner, that Book II would be *Tunes of the Silent Chanter!* My brother and I decided that when we did publish Book II, we would do as he suggested, even though it was said jokingly.” (This proposed title is referred to in *The Gordon Highlanders Pipe Music Collection* using “From” instead of “of”).

This exhibition (at the time of writing emerging from its formative stages) will have static displays of many of the artefacts of his life — the brooch presented to him by Queen Victoria, his pipes, some of his notebooks, manuscripts and much more. There will be



The scan of the above tune is taken from GS McLennan's manuscript book. Each completed tune was transcribed by GS into this book and allocated a consecutive number. If appropriate, a name was also added. In this instance, the title has been added later by DR MacLennan and the note entered by GS explains the origins of the tune. It was written in the trenches in France (a tune from a silent chanter?) and GS liked it so much, he wanted to have the band play it as they crossed the German Frontier in 1918. However, the order was that the Regimental March should be played so GS hid the tune away in his notebook where it remained until long after his death.

The announcement of a competition for a tune to be named *The Braemar Gathering* prompted DR MacLennan to encourage GS's son George to enter this tune. The 165 entries were submitted anonymously to the judges. One of the judges subsequently told George that on first hearing this tune he immediately thought "GS McLennan!" but dismissed the thought, knowing that he'd been dead for 20 years. The winner was to perform the tune at the next Braemar Gathering in September 1950 and DR persuaded a very reluctant George to play. Despite uncertainty and nerves he performed as never before, convinced that his father's hands were on the chanter that day. After giving *The Braemar Gathering* its first public airing, he was presented with his father's prize by King George VI. Now a standard in the piping repertoire it could have entered the public domain 32 years earlier as, perhaps — *The Gordon Highlanders Crossing The German Frontier*.

The accompanying photos are of George McLennan performing the tune at Braemar and being presented to the King.



illustrations of his music, introducing the people and places that inspired his works, or to which he dedicated it. And of course, there will be music — a combination of local and national performers providing an audio and video background to the exhibition. If all goes well and we get a good response to our efforts, it is hoped that the exhibition — in part or entirety — will subsequently transfer to the central belt, perhaps next year.

My father, George, adored GS but I believe he suffered somewhat under the weight of expectation that came with being the son of a Titan of the piping world. Certainly it took the warm and generous encouragement of his wife and uncle, DR, to persuade him to per-

form *The Braemar Gathering* before the King at Braemar in 1950.

The story of that day is told in the photo caption above but both the sons of GS McLennan bore that burden of expectation.

My father told me that sometime in the 1930s, his younger brother John had been complimented on his piping by a couple of old worthies. "Aye, you're a fine piper, John, but you're nowhere near as good as your father".

John's reply was simple. "And who have you heard playing who was as good as my father?" No response was forthcoming. John refused to be bowed under the weight of expectation on the son of Pipe Major GS McLennan. Indeed a hard act to follow. ●

Tunes From a Silent Chanter: The Life and Works of Pipe Major GS McLennan opens at the St Fergus Gallery in Wick on Friday, September 24 for four weeks as part of the fringe at the Royal National Mòd 2010. The Mòd opens on Friday, October 8, and runs until Saturday, October 16.

The exhibition may be contacted at gsmclennan@btinternet.com

The Gordon Highlander's Museum in Aberdeen is holding a temporary exhibition on the Music of the Regiment — *Cogadh no Sith (War or Peace)*. This special exhibition runs until November 28 and also features the work of GS McLennan together with that of many other notable Gordons.

www.gordonhighlanders.com/exhibits