

The Ian McLellan Interviews

PARTS ONE and TWO

This article is reproduced with grateful thanks to pipingpress.com , Robert Wallace and Ian McLellan.

Two old boys of the 214 Glasgow Company of the Boys' Brigade have come together to prepare this information. They have collaborated to record this three parted article which has already been variously published in the RSPBA magazine and the Piping Times. The author of the work is Robert Wallace and the subject matter is "the piping life and times of Pipe Major Ian McLellan BEM". Both Robert and Ian, albeit of different generations, began their respective piping careers as pupils of Alex Ibell in the 214BB in Whiteinch.

Robert is a journalist by profession and is editor of the RSPBA magazine. He was for fifteen years the principal of The College of Piping and editor of its magazine The Piping times. He is a double gold medallist and Winner of the Bratach Gorm and was a member of Muirhead & Sons Pipe Band under Pipe Major Robert Hardie. Ian, you will find as the pages unfold, is the most successful Pipe Major in the history of the pipe band movement and had huge success as a soloist winning every significant professional Ceol Beag competition.



Robert

Ian

P/M IAN MCLELLAN BEM STRATHCLYDE POLICE

PART ONE



Strathclyde Police PB in 1991 with Ian's final Worlds banner

Now retired from the RSPBA adjudicator's tent, P/M Ian McLellan is the most successful pipe major in the history of the pipe band movement. With his band he won 12 Grade One World Championship titles at the helm of the legendary Strathclyde Police Pipe Band. (The band is pictured above in 1991 with Ian's last World's banner). He was also an expert performer on the solo platform winning all the ceol beag prizes on offer and setting a standard of execution and expression that few could match. In later excerpts we will look at his early career but in this interview we concentrate on his pipe band work, work that made him a household name around the world.

You must have inherited players at all different levels. How did you meld that together into a unit?

I did do a lot of work with them on a one to one basis. I am not just talking about the weaker players – the stronger players as well. You know what it's like; little things can creep in to the playing as a unit that can upset the applecart. So I did an awful lot of one to one tuition with all the players during the winter months. I was very lucky that I had the facility to do that. We had the band room and I could put up a rota of who was with me and when. Once I was quite happy that all the guys were familiar with the tunes that we would be competing with, I would then start doubling them up, then a quartet, always on the chanter and eventually we would go on to the pipes. That's how I built up this very tight unison. That would probably be throughout the winter, though with police duties December was a no-no for us with the build up to Christmas, so we never had any practices then. But as soon as January came I would work away building things up slowly but surely and that went on until the middle of April but in between times have band practices with the whole band playing together.



Ian outside police HQ in Glasgow with one of his first Worlds banners

Would you be fixing chanterers or picking reeds for them at this point?

I always went to the McAllister's for our reeds; we never played anything else. When the McAllister reed came on the market Tom McAllister said would I fancy trying them. I said okay but they were very, very sore to begin with. They were strong! But we persisted with them and I never used anything else after that.

Why was that?

Because I felt they were so consistent. There was real body in the cane. If you ever had any problem with it you just said so to Tom and he would change them.

Even when you were playing against his band, Shotts?

Oh yes, the man was a gentleman. Some people had reservations about Jock but I got on great with him because I just answered him back and told him to shut up!

Was this the Sinclair chanterers that belonged to Lanarkshire police that you were setting up?

Yes. The Shotts got a set of Sinclairs and so did Lanarkshire Police at the same time. Campbell McGougan who had the Lanarkshire Police had a very good ear. He had pipers like Hugh MacInnes and Barry Donaldson in his band and a lot of others who were pretty tight players. Obviously when the police forces amalgamated and became Strathclyde we were playing wooden Warnock chanterers. They were a good enough chanter but they didn't have that energy that came out of the Sinclair chanter. It took a little while to get the ear to adjust but as soon as we had, I said to myself 'oh, we've got something here'. I knew right away. At that point we started to play the McAllister reed – this was before they produced their own Warmac chanter. The same reed was going into the Shotts' Sinclairs and they were getting a great sound so I thought that if could get anywhere near that I'd be quite happy. To my mind we actually refined on it. I started going through to Willie Sinclair and he taught me a lot about how to work the chanterers. I always remember I felt the chanterers were dull on the C, the D and the E, compared to the other notes on the chanter. So he put them into the lathe and took some very fine sandpaper and gave the middle a gentle rub. He just skinned the shell of the chanter and these notes came alive. He said the wood there had been just a little thick and the chanter wasn't vibrating. I was absolutely amazed. He said we could probably have done it by gouging the holes but you would have to take out quite a lot of wood to achieve the same result. If you gently sanded it, it brightened up right away and then you could fine tune it by taking a little from the back of the hole.

Once you had the chanters going did you find a difference in your prizes right away?

Oh yes. I don't want to sound big-headed or anything but we were actually getting a far better sound than anyone else was getting. I mean, if you strike up and you hit E and it hits the judge right between the eyes and the playing is up to scratch you are going to make a big impression. We held that sound for a long, long while and eventually other bands latched on to what we were doing and slowly but surely were catching up on us. By the time I was ready to go they had caught up! I got out just in time!

And what about Alex Connell and your drum corps? How did you work with them?

As far as a lot of drummers were concerned Alex was probably the most musical drummer out there. He might not have had the best technicians but when it came to the actual music and accompanying the melody he knew how to bring out the music, how to support what we were playing.

So how did you achieve that? Did you sit down with chanter and drum pad?

Well once we had made up our minds what we were going to play – and we tried to change at least one medley completely every year – I would record it on the pipes at the tempo I had in my head and I thought was going to work and then Alex would go away and he would start making up drum beatings. Then he would come back to me and we would see what worked and what didn't. That would be on the chanter and pad. However what we agreed on would not always work when we came to try it in the band and Alex would get frustrated if we had to up the tempo and his beats were then too crammed. Fortunately that didn't happen too often.

Did you have a natural instinct for tempo?

I had the music in my head and I always thought it would work but sometimes when we tried a particular tune in the band it just died and the adjustments were necessary.

When did you win your first Worlds?

1976 and the next time after that was 1979. In '77 and '78 we were second to the Dysart under Bob Shepherd. In '79 we won it at Nottingham. Then in 1980 was the first time they ever held it at Bellahouston and Shotts won it and we were second. It was after that that we went on the run '81, '82, '83, '84, '85 and '86 so that was six in a row. Then the 78th Highlanders under Bill Livingstone won it in '87 and then we won it the next four years on the trot.



P/M does not look to happy with that run! Pipers are (l – r): Neil Strickland, Wilson Brown, John Wilson, Barry Donaldson, Alasdair Ross, John Winter, Jim Wark, Harry McAleer, Jim MacLean and the P/M.

Did you play badly in '87?

No, I wouldn't say we played badly, but I wasn't as happy with it as I would normally have been and when we played it was actually coming down in torrents and we were on near the beginning. I think we were on second or something like that. The 78th came on second last and by that time the weather had cleared. I am not saying it would have made any difference on the day because they did play well and the type of stuff they played in their medley was a wee bit more commercial than what we were playing – but I have to say that from the time the Championship became a two leg affair with an MSR and a Medley we never ever lost an MSR contest. We won it every time. Even the last year I was pipe major and we were second to the Field Marshal we won the March, Strathspey and Reel. We were hot and cold with medleys. One year we would come out with a cracker but see trying to follow it up the next! It might be two or three years later we'd find another one, one that really worked. The two that always stuck in my mind were the ones that started with Carradale Bay and the other with Detroit Highlanders. They were two cracking medleys as far as Strathclyde Police was concerned. I never felt we had another medley that could compare to these two.

P/M IAN MCLELLAN BEM STRATHCLYDE POLICE

PART TWO

We continue our illuminating interview with P/M Ian McLellan, formerly of Strathclyde Police Pipe Band and 12 times winner of the World Championship crown...

Your record is quite stupendous; 12 World titles isn't it? You must be very proud of that.

Well I'm really happy I suppose. The only championship we did better at in my time was at Cowal, where we won 13 titles. I keep watching Richard Parkes and he is catching up as far as major championships are concerned and I think if he keeps going he will win more majors than we ever did.



P/M Richard Parkes with yet another trophy

So he's Tiger Woods to your Jack Nicklaus.

Yes, [laughs] but the difficulty comes in trying to get six in a row or 12 World titles. But he has a great band, a great band and you never know. Field Marshal restored a lot of people's faith in the pipe band movement last year [2011]. They really had the package. There's no doubt about that. In March, Strathspey and Reel playing Richard has now got it off to a fine art as far as his band is concerned. He and I have gone down the same alleyway as far as that is concerned. It is something that has developed with him. At one point he was pushing things. Then he went from one extreme to the other, being too cautious. Somebody must have had word in his ear. I didn't say anything to him apart from making the odd comment on sheets. Now he's on an even keel again and he's really playing very, very well. Most of the time his medleys have been very good, well-constructed, well thought out.

Most of the tunes he plays are melodic, unlike a lot of the instantly forgettable stuff that's going around. A band finishes and you say to yourself 'I can't remember one single tune out of that lot'. There isn't a melodic line you can latch on to and remember. It's all about ensemble and if there's not a strong melodic line the band has no real chance of making an impression, not with me anyway. Your ear tells you what you like and what you don't like. It's no use using drum effects and seconds trying to enhance something that is not really there.



P/M Terry Tully, 2010 World Champion pipe major with St Laurence O'Toole, Dublin

Terry Tully has done a wonderful job with the St Laurence O'Toole. I've judged his band many times. I used to go over to Ireland to a place called Malahide on the outskirts of Dublin. It was always the first band competition of the season. Terry used to ask me what I thought, and I always re-assured him that he was going down the right lines; that if he kept going that way he would come to the surface, no doubt about it, and two or three years later he took the Worlds. The man has a lot of talent. His medleys are tremendous, albeit that they have maybe an Irish tinge to them; but in saying that he uses the tunes well. Their MSR playing has improved a lot over the years as well. I don't think they did themselves justice at the last Worlds [Aug 2012]. It might have been an off-day for them. It happens to every band. You don't want them to happen but they do. [Terry has since handed over the reins at SLOT to his son Allen].

Why is it that since your heyday Scottish bands have failed to dominate?

Some of our bands have started to come through this year.

The Power have come on a lot in the last two or three years. Chris Armstrong is starting to find his feet now. I think he understands what the whole scene is about. He's beginning to make it happen for his band and I hope he continues with it.

Inveraray under Stuart Liddell can't be faulted musically but to my mind they don't yet have the power in their sound to captivate. I think it will come as they mature. They are a very young band and hopefully Stuart will manage to hold on to his players but I worry that being where they are the band will fragment as people leave for university or to take up jobs. If you have to keep replacing you are not really progressing you are flat-lining. But I sincerely hope that doesn't happen to them because I think they have got an awful lot to give. You know I was thinking back recently that the first year we won the Worlds in 1976 most of that band wouldn't have been born!

Boghall are one of those bands that to me blow hot and cold. They have done very well this year and I don't like to criticise them because they are always there or thereabouts; but they are just not consistent enough. If you are going to make it at the highest level you've got to come in week in, week out, telling the judges that they can't ignore you. Their Achilles heel at times is their sound; it doesn't always have the required impact.

I have a feeling Strathclyde Police are going to be a stronger band next year. There's a lot of talent in that band. Piping-wise they have a lot of good players and they're all young and really keen to do well. I think Duncan [Nicholson] is beginning to find his feet too. He'll get them going well.

I don't know how the Shotts situation is going to pan out. Let's hope they are back where they belong in 2013.

Fife Constabulary are a good outfit but looking beyond that I can't see any others such as the Vale or Lothian and Borders [since disbanded] being in contention yet for the top six but you can never be sure.

Can you summarise for us what you are looking for from a band? Do you place a high emphasis on the technique? Some bands cut out a lot of the work.

Obviously a good attack and how they go into the first tune. First impressions always count. If you strike up and the sound's nice and the first tune is played well together, you are then going to start listening to them, to the nitty-gritty, the technique, is the intonation good, musicality. I mean it is not rocket science but the big thing is the sound; and it doesn't matter what grade it is. If the band has a decent sound for that grade your ears immediately perk up and then you start listening for how the tunes blend together and flow. Then you evaluate how good the technique is. Are the basics there and are they played together. But if the tune is flowing you generally find that they are fingering together, one sort of goes with the other.

What about if you hear a mistake?

I'm not really too hard on a band as far as that is concerned you know, someone making a note error. Within reason of course, not a two-bar brainstorm. That would be unacceptable. But a minor slip is nothing. In fact sometimes you are so happy with how a band is playing that by the time you get to the end you've forgotten about it.

Is it the band that you are listening to or the piping alone?

Although I am doing piping, the ensemble effect does make an impression on you because if a band doesn't have that overall blended sound the musicality is not going to come through the same for a start. I've seen me listening to a band, you can hear that the pipe corps is trying to play what you are wanting them to play, but the other half of the band is destroying them by not holding the same notes and phrasing in the same way, so your impression of the piping is diminished. It has to be. The drumming can affect things drastically if it is not doing anything sympathetic to the piping.

In terms of the judging package, do you think the points structure is correct? Do you agree with an ensemble preference when there is a tie?

Sometimes I wonder. I've seen results where a band like Field Marshal have had two firsts in piping but don't win the competition because of their ensemble. As a piper that is not right, but that is the way the rules are.

Sometimes when it is a drummer on the ensemble he will be swayed by the drumming.

Yes, perhaps, but then it could happen the other way as well when you have a piper on ensemble. They won't know the intricacies of drumming. It might sound OK to me but a drummer would dismiss it as rubbish. But at the end of the day I come back to what sounds musical as a band. That is the ultimate thing.

We are coming to a close now Ian so to finish could you tell us which bands over the years you have enjoyed?

Well going back, definitely the Muirheads band and before that the Edinburgh Police. Muirheads under Bob Hardie had an accuracy of playing and technique that was of the highest order. The Shotts under Tom McAllister had a sound that used to take the breath away; really brilliant. Edinburgh Police impressed me for years when they were under Ian MacLeod. I used to think Bob Martin's Boghall was a great band. More up to date we had Simon Fraser. I was even impressed with them going way back when they competed against us. They were always a band that you knew you were going to have to play well if you were to get in front of them. At times the 78th under Bill Livingstone were very enjoyable, then of course the Field Marshal. Right enough when I think about it, for the past 20 years the Field Marshal have been impressing me and now SLOT too as I said.

What is amazing Ian is that you still have the enthusiasm for it?

Oh yes, I still love it and I hope the rule barring over 75s from judging is lifted. I was feeling sad about the whole idea of packing it in, being put out to grass as it were. I am happy at the thought that I might be able to carry on a while longer. Sometimes when you are doing the juveniles you think the youngsters must be wondering who that old hop along is that is judging them, what the hell has he done! I quietly hope they might take a look at the programme for the World Championships and see the list of winners there.

PART THREE FOLLOWS